Fictional Post-Apocalypses, with Special Reference to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Jose Saramago's *Blindness*: A Comparative Study

Ville-Markus Nevalainen

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

Tutkielmassa perehdytään kahteen post-apokalyptiseen romaaniin, Pulitzer-palkitun kirjailijan Cormac McCarthyn romaaniin *The Road* (2006) sekä Nobel-palkitun kirjailijan Jose Saramagon romaaniin *Blindness* (1995). Post-apokalyptiset teokset nähdään usein kevyinä genreromaaneina, joita tutkielmassa edustavat Robert McCammonin *Swan Song* (1987) sekä Stephen Kingin *The Stand* (1978). Tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään millä tavoin *The Road* ja *Blindness* eroavat ja samalla hyödyntävät lajityypin tyypillisimpiä konventioita. Tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään millä tavoin McCarthyn ja Saramagon post-apokalyptiset teokset eroavat lajityypistä ja miksi he ovat kirjoittaneet heille niin epätyypilliseen lajiin perustuvan teoksen.

Tutkielman johdantoluvussa esitellään kirjailijoiden ja lajityypin taustoja, sekä kuvaillaan lyhyesti romaanien *Swan Song* ja *The Stand* juonet ja tyypillisimmät piirteet. Toisessa luvussa esitellään *The Road* ja miten se monin tavoin kuuluu tyypilliseen post-apokalyptisen kirjallisuuteen samalla kun se haastaa valtaosaa lajityypin teemoista. Kolmannessa luvussa tarkastellaan romaania *Blindness*, ja siinä perehdytään ensin niihin moniin tapoihin, joilla teos toimii vastoin lajityypin tyypillisimpiä konventioita, ja miten se siitä huolimatta kuuluu post-apokalyptiseen lajiin. Saramagon myöhempään kirjallisuuteen viitaten tutkielma pyrkii selvittämään millä tavalla ja mitä tarkoitusta varten Saramago luo fiktiivisiä maailmojaan. Neljännessä luvussa pyritään osoittamaan *The Roadin* ja *Blindnessin* yhtäläisyyksiä niiden tavoissa hyödyntää post-apokalyptista miljöötä narratiivisena kehyksenä, jonka avulla kirjailijat voivat kertoa jotain syvällisempää ihmisluonnosta.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Jose Saramago, *Blindness*, post-apocalypse, narrative frame, Robert McCammon, *Swan Song*, Stephen King, *The Stand*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Aims and methods

Even though the earliest post-apocalyptic fiction novel can be traced back all the way to 1826 and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, it was not until the twentieth century that the genre began to truly take off. As a genre that focuses on what happens after a disaster has brought an end to the world, it is no wonder that World War II and the emergence of nuclear weapons led people to think about post-apocalyptic realities. As with every genre, there has been a wide amount of variety, especially on how the world has come to an end, from nuclear wars to diseases and zombie outbreaks. However, as Petter Skult (2019) argues in his study on the genre, it has mostly been associated with pulp science fiction novels for mass market audiences after the fear of nuclear war (1). The post-apocalypse has subsequently continued its success in mass market genres and later in movies and videogames.

In this thesis, I study novels that explore the immediate effects of an apocalypse that destroys most of humanity and/or the planet. In all but one of the chosen works readers are shown the world before, during and after the apocalypse. I have chosen four works that I have divided into two categories for comparison, the categories being novels written by more critically established literary authors and those written by genre authors. My focus is on the former category which I analyze in order to understand why these authors have chosen to write in a genre most often associated with popular fiction and how their works both fit within the tradition of post-apocalyptic fiction while simultaneously go against some of the genre conventions.

The novels that I focus on are *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy and *Blindness* by Jose Saramago (1995, translated to English in 1997). Both are critically acclaimed authors who have won significant prizes, the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize, respectively, and who both have written only one post-apocalyptic novel, or, debatably, even a genre novel. These novels are contrasted to more traditional post-apocalyptic mass market novels to show the typical conventions of the genre and to highlight the differences in the two literary post-apocalypses. Such novels are *Swan Song* (1987) by Robert R. McCammon and *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King, both of whom are considered by some critics to be horror authors.

Though both works are older, they are still considered some of the best and most popular works of their respective authors.

1.2 Presentation of the Authors and the Genre

1.2.1 Cormac McCarthy

Cormac McCarthy, born 1933, is an acclaimed author revered mostly by critics who have written not only hundreds of articles and essays on his works but also full-length books such as *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1993), *Reading Cormac McCarthy* (2009), and *Cormac McCarthy's Borders and Landscapes* (2016). McCarthy has written ten novels; the first five are set in an Appalachia, and the subsequent four in the American Southwest, near the border of Mexico. *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) is often considered his masterpiece, so much so that the critic Harold Bloom called it the best American novel by a living author (*Blood Meridian* vii). Still, even Bloom notes that he had trouble reading the book, abandoning it twice before finally finishing it because of its intense violence (vii).

McCarthy's later works are his most well-known. His *Border* trilogy (1992-1998) offers a somewhat more positive outlook on human nature and the cowboy lifestyle, while the following novel, *No Country for Old Men* (2005), about illegal drug trade, showed a return to the themes of misery and violence. The novel was adapted into a film by the Coen Brothers in 2007, and won four Academy Awards, including Best Picture. McCarthy's tenth and latest novel, *The Road*, is his only ahistorical novel about post-apocalyptic America. It is also often considered his most accessible novel. After winning the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, being chosen for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* Book Club, and being filmed by director John Hillcoat in 2009, it has become his most famous and widely recognized novel.

All of McCarthy's works share certain themes and stylistic features that have made him an engrossing author. Perhaps the most unique identifying factor of McCarthy is his writing style, that combines epic narrative with minimalism. The epic feature is often found in the narrative that is filled with archaic and biblical words and phrases, which are often voiced by his narrator and characters, most notably by the narrator of *The Road* and Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, as argued by Alan Noble (237). The poetic language defines much of McCarthy's writing and the ashen world found in *The Road* is often described with phrases such as "[b]y the day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp"

(32) and the boy as a "[g]olden chalice, good to house a god" (78). Many of McCarthy's works have been considered highly Biblical in nature, and though the novels rarely deal with religion explicitly, it appears both thematically and symbolically in his narratives.

Minimalism, on the other hand, manifests in his writing in numerous ways, the most notable being his sparse use of punctuation. McCarthy refuses to use quotation marks in dialogue, and he rarely uses commas or any other punctuation besides periods in his poetic run-on sentences and short matter-of-fact descriptions. His refusal to use any punctuation is taken so far that he has chosen not to use even apostrophes, writing words such as "don't" and "can't" as "dont" and "cant." Dialogue also often leaves out the "he said," thus leaving it ambiguous as to who is speaking.

One aspect of McCarthy's writing is the often argued and debated nihilism, especially the portrayal of despicable acts of violence and abuse that is often committed against or by his main characters. These protagonists are portrayed with no judgement from the narrator, leaving readers to decide why McCarthy chooses so often to portray their attackers "so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs" (*Blood* 56). The lack of judgement can be seen in McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God* (1973), where the main character who ends up becoming a serial killer who commits necrophilia is described as "[a] child of God much like yourself perhaps" (6).

When portraying his characters, McCarthy often avoids going inside their minds, settling instead on a more distant perspective where readers are left to decipher from the character's body language and environment what they are thinking. This forces the reader to use mind-reading, or Theory of Mind, as presented by Lisa Zunshine. This mind-reading suggests that readers can read the minds of fictional characters through their body language and physical action. That is, as little as seeing an entity performing self-initiated action is needed for readers to "assume that this entity possesses thoughts, feelings and desires, at least some of which we could intuit, interpret and frequently, misinterpret" (Zunshine 22).

But it is not just the thoughts the character's have that are often left out from McCarthy's narratives. Some other narratological gaps in his works include such as where and when *Outer Dark* (1968) is taking place, and both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* have unnamed main characters, "the kid" and "the man" and "the boy" respectively. Referring to characters without names is used in other novels, too, such as in *All the Pretty Horses* where the name of

the main character is not revealed until page 7, and only on page 20 does the narrator first time refer to “he” or “the boy” by his first name, John Grady.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that most of McCarthy’s novels include travel as a major theme, as the characters either feel the need travel or are forced to by circumstances. Often, as in *Blood Meridian*, *Cities of Plain*, and *The Road*, this does not end well for them.

All these elements found in other novels by McCarthy are also found in *The Road* and arguably in many instances taken even further. These will be discussed in a separate chapter.

1.2.2 Jose Saramago

Jose Saramago (1922–2010) was an acclaimed writer, often considered the greatest Portuguese writer of his time. His death was followed by two days of mourning, declared by Portugal (BBC). His novels have sold more than two million copies (*NY Times*), and he remained productive until his last days, his final novel, *Cain*, being released 2009. He won the Nobel prize in Literature in 1998. *Blindness* was one of the novels noted by the Swedish Academy, the other two prominent ones being *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991, translated to English in 1994) and *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982, translated to English in 1987).

Like McCarthy, Saramago uses a distinctive writing style where he omits the use of capital letters, quotation marks, and periods, especially in dialogue. Lines of dialogue are separated with commas and a capital letter, rarely featuring any tags like “said”, thus creating long winding run-on sentences, as in the following example:

> We have a colonel here who believes the solution would be to shoot the blind as soon as they appear [the Ministry of Defense said], Corpses instead of blind men would scarcely improve the situation [the Ministry of Health said], To be blind is not the same as being dead, Yes, but to be dead is to be blind, So there are going to be about two hundred of them, Yes, And what shall we do with the lorry-drivers, Put them inside as well. (*Blindness* 104)

Conversations and paragraphs can span several pages before a paragraph break. The narration flows often seamlessly from character to character, and to an omniscient viewpoint of the city. These complementary—and at times contradictory—viewpoints all aim to create a larger, more detailed portrayal of the situation.

This distinctive style is accompanied by a narrator who has a clear personality. At times, the narrator is there to share the experience with the reader:

> At the door to the balcony stood the girl with dark glasses and the wife of the first blind man, we cannot tell what presentiments, what intuition, what inner voices might have roused them, nor do we know how they found their way here, there is no point searching for explanations for the moment, conjectures are free. (*Blindness* 264)

Still, the narrator remains in control of the story: "These are moments that cannot last for ever [sic], these women have been here for more than an hour it is time they felt cold, I'm cold, said the girl with dark glasses" (266). At times the narrator provides his own thoughts and commentary by revealing his preferences: "As for the museums, it is truly heart-breaking, all those people, and I do mean people, all those paintings, all those sculptures, without a single visitor standing before them" (228). But perhaps the most interesting part, which I will return to later on in my study, is when the narrator hopes that "perhaps we will not have to lament the loss of other lives" (203) when a fire is spreading, only to describe a few pages later how "some did not make it, they remained inside, crushed against the walls, others were trampled under foot and transformed into a formless, bloody mass" (205).

Saramago's narrative flow shifts between reality and fantasy, providing ironic, often melancholy, commentary on the events. Saramago's works often imagine fantastic events that focus on larger themes and concepts, rather than individual people, such as those found in *Blindness,* or those in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and *Cain* (2009) that retell the stories of Jesus Christ and Cain, respectively.

1.2.3 On the Post-Apocalyptic Genre Today

As any genre, the post-apocalyptic genre has evolved and branched out to different subgenres, one of the most popular variations in the twenty-first century being the dystopian Young Adult novel. Some examples of this are *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), the *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013), and *The Maze Runner* series (2009-2016). All the listed novels have enjoyed massive success and have had film adaptions, *The Hunger Games* being in the lead, having sold more than 65 million copies in the U.S. alone (*The Wrap*). However, in these novels the post-apocalypse is used more as a backdrop and part of the history of the world rather than as an element that drives the plot forward. The main plot takes place usually decades after the apocalypse has already happened. How the world ended is referred to mostly in exposition,

though it is common that the role of the post-apocalypse becomes more prominent and explored as the series progresses and old ruins are discovered. In this sense, these novels can be argued to belong firmly to the post-apocalyptic genre as they focus on the *post* in the post-apocalypse, or what the world might look like after the end. In all the novels, the world has withstood an apocalypse of sorts, whether through natural causes (rising sea levels in *The Hunger Games*, solar flares in *The Maze Runner*) or human involvement (wars in *Divergent*). Yet, it can just as well be argued that they lose something by reducing the apocalypse to merely a backdrop. In these novels, the end of the world is never fully developed in the way that it is in the novels that I analyze in this thesis. Instead, it is used to push the story to a desired place with a somewhat plausible explanation. The series' mentioned above could easily not even take place on Earth but in a new fantastic reality, since at times the connections to the real world and history are slim at best. In some of these works, the discovery that they are currently on Earth is even used as a twist later in the story. In these instances, the apocalypse is mostly a way to explain and justify why and how our world has morphed into to a world that has hunger game battles, experimental mazes, or that divides people in different factions based on their virtues.

The genre has evolved and continued its relative success in other forms of media too, such as movies and video games. The adaptiveness of the genre can be seen within the varying circumstances of the apocalypse. As seen in the above examples, climate change has become more prominent in the twenty first century as the fear of nuclear war has faded. However many of the more recent works have reduced the post-apocalypse into an extraordinary setting that allows for an almost alien world to exist on Earth, and give some surface level commentary on our current lifestyle, whether that is the desert world in the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) or the world tormented by the mysterious monsters found in *Bird Box* (2018). Though works like these belong firmly into the post-apocalyptic genre because of their setting, they feature very little of any of the main tropes of the genre as new societies have already been rebuilt and the immediate effects of the apocalypse have been overcome. In my analysis, the focus is on works that have the post-apocalypse as the driving force of the plot, not merely as the setting, and that explore the immediate effects of the apocalypse.

1.2.4 Genre Examples: *Swan Song* and *The Stand*

Swan Song presents a world destroyed by nuclear weapons as World War III begins between the United States and the Soviet Union. The story follows individuals who have survived the

initial strike and are now trying to make sense of the broken world that they find themselves in. Nearly all of the United States has been turned to dust and ruin. In a central plot, a woman named Sister finds a glass ring that gives her visions. The ring is trying to lead her to a girl named Swan who has unbeknownst to herself magical abilities that include experiencing the pain that plants suffer, but also resurrecting flowers and trees. Sister is chased by an unnatural being referred to as the Man with the Scarlet Eye, who can change his appearance and is believed to have lived for numerous lifetimes. Swan and Sister face their own horrors, psychopaths, and thieves as they try to find the reason they survived. Some of the other point of view characters are a boy called Roland and a veteran named Macklin, who begin to form their own army in their quest to rid the world of all weakness that still persists.

There is a seven-year gap in the middle of the novel. The nuclear winter goes on and the sun has not come out for years, nothing grows, and the rain is filled with radiation. During this time, many of the characters have suffered from tumor-like growths around their heads, which limit their vision and breathing. As the storylines are tied together, the growths begin to crack and reveal the "true faces" of the characters; Swan and Sister are found to be breathtakingly beautiful, whereas Roland and Macklin have demonic faces that scare even themselves. Swan has found out that she can rejuvenate the earth, and people try to rebuild society with her. The Man with the Scarlet Eye teams up with Roland and Macklin and capture Swan and Sister. They then find their way to a supposed "God" that turns out to be the ex-president of the United States, who still has the codes for a doomsday weapon, which is set to destroy the icecaps and ruin the world. In the final struggle, Roland, Macklin, and the Man with the Scarlet Eye are defeated, and the weapon is stopped. Swan begins to heal the world one town at a time, even though it is suggested that the Man with the Scarlet Eye still survives in another form.

In *The Stand*, the world ends in a more quiet way as a disease known as "Captain Trips" is accidentally released. The virus is 100% contagious and immune to medicine, killing approximately 99,4% of the world's population. The story follows individuals who are immune to the disease. The survivors are drawn to two different places, the first group going to Boulder, Colorado, and to Mother Abigail in an attempt to re-establish democratic society, and the other to Las Vegas and Randall Flagg in an attempt to find and re-arm tools of destruction. Mother Abigail is found by those who dream of her, seeing her as an embodiment of good, whereas Randall Flagg is shown to have demonic powers and drawing thieves and murderers to his side.

Some of the people in Boulder decide to send men to spy on Flagg's territory, while some of the inhabitants left there, tempted by Flagg, bomb and kill several people in Boulder. The surviving people decide that they need to confront Flagg and they send four men to Las Vegas. They are promptly captured, but as a nuclear warhead is brought to Flagg, it accidentally goes off due to Flagg using his magical powers. Shortly after, a child immune to the disease is born in Boulder symbolizing a new world beginning. In a brief epilogue, it is shown that Randall Flagg survived the explosion by teleporting at the last moment.

Swan Song and *The Stand* are often categorized as horror/fantasy within the post-apocalyptic genre, and while there are fantasy elements that are not necessarily found in all post-apocalyptic novels, many of the other tropes are shared within the genre. The novels give a detailed description of the end of the world in their respective ways, through nuclear war and influenza. Both are about a thousand pages in length and filled with dozens of viewpoint characters. They share many of the genre's typical conventions, such as characters travelling and witnessing different ruins, losing track of time, and reflecting on the world before the apocalypse and what led to it. Both novels designate good and evil into two separate camps, and while in *Swan Song* the religious good and evil is suggested in the characters of Swan and The Man with the Scarlet Eye, it is made perfectly clear in *The Stand*: "[I]t does rather seem as if we're the knot in a tug-o-war rope between heaven and hell, doesn't it?" (546). The first parts of the novels introduce the characters before the apocalypse happens. After the apocalypse, the characters try to make sense of the new world, find other survivors, and rebuild society. The last parts of the novels have good and evil facing each other, the good triumphing and building a new colony in peace.

These tropes are used to highlight the similarities, and especially differences, found in *The Road* and *Blindness* in order to understand and demonstrate the different ways in which the two novels approach the post-apocalyptic genre.

2. *The Road* as Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

2.1. *The Road*

In *The Road,* a man and a boy, both left unnamed, are desperately trying to survive in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The boy, born sometime after the unspecified catastrophe, is the man's only reason for living and surviving in this wasteland, and he tells the boy: "If you died I would want to die too" (9). Deciding that they cannot survive another winter in their current location, they begin their journey to reach the coast in hope of finding a place where there may still be life. On their journey, they confront other survivors, many of whom have turned to cannibalism. The man and the boy suffer from starvation as they try to find canned food that has not yet been discovered by others, since this is almost exclusively the only food that is still edible. During their journey, they find nothing living save a few mushrooms (40) and rotting apples (127), the only signs of any lifeforms besides men having survived this far. The man wonders whether any animals, such as cows, are alive anywhere, deciding that it is unlikely "Fed what? Saved for what?" (127).

There are only a few glimpses of the preceding world, but even these are left largely unexplored, since the man knows that he cannot begin to explain any of this to the boy who was born only after the disaster. The man's dreams and memories are slowly fading away—as is everything else in this new ruined world. After the boy was born, the man's wife committed suicide and tried to convince the man to do the same. She tells him that "My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born" (59) and while the man sees the boy as a reason to survive, the wife thinks otherwise. In her mind, they should all commit suicide before they suffer a fate worse than death in the hands of cannibals and murderers. Eventually, she leaves in the dark, abandoning the man alone with the boy.

After many close calls, such as those with cannibals and other marauders, freezing to death and starving, the man and the boy reach the coast only to find it as dead as everything else in the world: "Cold. Desolate. Birdless" (230). The man's sickness, signaled on the very first pages by his coughing, gets worse and he dies shortly after. The boy, left alone, is found by a group of survivors, who assure him that they are the good guys. Readers are also inclined to believe so, if only for the fact that they have children with them who are usually eaten by other survivors.

The film version directed by John Hillcoat mostly follows the novel's plot and much of the dialogue has been taken straight from the novel. Some of the few differences are rearranging the order of scenes, additional flashbacks, and removing some scenes, which can be considered as rather typical for a film adaptation. However, one of the more significant changes is the removal of some of the ambiguity in the original work, which is the result of transferring novel to film. Most of this ambiguity comes from McCarthy's writing style and the narratological gaps that it leaves, which requires readers to envision what is happening and where. There is a significant amount of religious imagery in the novel, a common theme both in post-apocalyptic fiction in general and in McCarthy's previous novels, which in *The Road* comes across mostly through narration and in the man's thoughts, such as when he describes the boy as "God's own firedrake" (31). Even if part of this is translated to the movie, specifically in the man's voiceover narration and in dialogue when the man asks Ely what if the boy was a god, most of it is lost, as the majority of the religious imagery in the novel is never said out loud by the man but presented as the man's, or the narrator's, thoughts.

The other way ambiguity comes across in the novel is more deliberate. As Ashley Kunsa explains, even if the man and the boy know where they are, their maps and the path they take are left unnamed: "The narrative's strategy is actually one of withholding place names, a provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be" (62). Both of these elements are lost in the adaptation, as viewers not only see the director's vision of the post-apocalyptic world, but even the map and the names of places are given.

The Road has been much analyzed, from its ambiguity and genre to the way the man is presented. Christopher Pizzino (2010) writes: "To read *The Road* as science fiction is to read against a daunting critical consensus" (358). The essay goes into more detail on why "an epic in the mode of horror" (358), a genre that has been suggested instead of science fiction, is insufficient in his view. The article discusses the difficulties critics have had in explaining *The Road*, since it is the only ahistorical novel from McCarthy, whose previous works are known for historical accuracy. This debate alone demonstrates how McCarthy's post-apocalyptical novel has been considered peculiar, not only as part of his personal bibliography but as part of a larger genre, or genres, depending on the critic.

The Road features many themes and elements that prove that it is part of the post-apocalyptic genre but the more closely it is read, the more it defies and pushes the genre

forward. What follows is firstly, an analysis of the elements that *The Road* shares with the other novels within the genre, and secondly, an exploration of the ways it defies the typical genre tropes.

2.2. *The Road* as a Post-Apocalyptic Novel

Beginning years after the apocalypse has already occurred, descriptions of destruction are found everywhere in *The Road*. Rather than breaking the narration into chapters, *The Road* has small segments, the shortest spanning only a line or two, and the longest ones a few pages. The emphasis on the setting can be seen here as many of these segments are spent almost solely on description, such as the following presented in its entirety:

> They hiked out along the dirt road and along a hill where a house had once stood. It had burned long ago. The rusted shape of a furnace standing in the black water of the cellar. Sheets of charred metal roofing crumpled in the fields where the wind had blown it. In the barn they scavenged a few handfuls of some grain he did not recognize out of the dusty floor of a metal hopper and stood eating it dust and all. Then they set out across the fields toward the road. (*The Road* 94)

Ruins are found everywhere, and elements of dust, smoke, and colorlessness are repeated throughout the novel as they come across different forms of destruction. As Pizzino states: "Never has McCarthy's well-known focus on particulars of setting and action—less an aesthetic interest in surface than a concern with the specificity of experience—been more fully and urgently elaborated, and never have the particulars more strongly challenged us to interrogate what we see" (366). The constantly repeating ruins and corpses witnessed alone make *The Road* unarguably post-apocalyptic. There are countless reminders of what once was but has now been lost.

The setting of *The Road* can be argued to be almost as much of a character as the man and the boy are, particularly if the amount of thought and detail is considered. Even if the roads are kept nameless, the attention to detail is so great that some have been able to map the road the man and the boy take throughout the novel, as argued by Kunsa (62). The wasteland remains a constant danger for the man and the boy, on many occasions even more so than the cannibals do—the main antagonistic force of the novel. Save for the part where the man and the boy find the doomsday bunker full of food, finding shelter and food remains a constant endeavor, and even when discovering the bunker, the man worries about how much time they can spend there:

> How long can we stay here Papa?
>
> Not long.
>
> How long is that?
>
> I dont know. Maybe one more day. Two.
>
> Because it's dangerous.
>
> Yes. (*The Road* 157).

The apocalypse and its effects on the world are the main driving force of the story and remain as such throughout the novel. In comparison, in *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, the later parts of both narratives pit the "good" and the "bad" guys against each other, during which everyday survival is forgotten. Even the motivations for fighting are not related to resources, but to the "bad" guys wanting to conquer the dying world and stop the symbolically "good" character. In *The Road*, the apocalypse alone remains a threat for all the characters. Even when they face cannibals and other antagonistic forces, the conflict always arises from the lack of resources. The marauders eat others in order to survive another day, not because they are presented as the embodiment of biblical evil.

It is through travel that we get to experience the *post-* in post-apocalypse, as the characters witness different ruins on their journey. Traveling, one of the recurring themes of the genre, as argued by Skult (73), allows the author to demonstrate both the scale and the variation of destruction found in the world, such as how both cities and the country as a whole have suffered in the apocalypse. The survivors travel from one place to another in search of food, shelter, and other humans to rely on. *The Road* fits perfectly into this category together with *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, as all three analyzed novels include a great deal of travel. Travel, and especially the act of walking, is such an integral part of *The Road*, that, according to Bo Pettersson, there are roughly forty different verbs used to refer to it throughout the novel. The man and the boy stop only to rest, always preferring to keep moving in hope of finding something better than what they currently have.

Traveling in the post-apocalyptic landscape is often motivated by hope and is at times the only source of it. Even in *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, the characters must keep moving as essential resources, such as food and shelter, are mostly lost in the post-apocalypse. At its core, movement symbolizes a refusal to believe in and accept post-apocalyptic circumstances, and hope that somewhere, even in such circumstances, there is a sanctuary to be found. As long as they stay on the road, there is a small chance of salvation. They keep moving in hopes of finding more food, people to rely on, and most importantly, a place that is still fertile and

untouched, where they could have lasting shelter. While traveling, the characters usually find both hope and desperation, stumbling upon threatening villains and finding small pockets of food, only to eventually discover a small society where their journey can finally come to an end, as the characters in *Swan Song* and *The Stand* do. No such ending to their journey is ever found in *The Road*, but the hope remains. As the man keeps repeating throughout the novel, they need to keep moving to survive.

Losing track of time is another significant motif in *The Road* as stated early on: "He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadnt kept a calendar for years" (2) and later again, "Late in the year. He hardly knew the month" (29). All the man knows is that he believes winter is approaching and it is getting colder, even if seasons are hard to identify in this nuclear winter-like environment, where forest fires and ash falling from the sky are both common occurrences. In their constant movement, the passage of time is marked in different ways, sometimes clearly, especially in moments of starvation, and at times more vaguely: "The days sloughed past uncounted and uncalendared" (292).

In a post-apocalyptic world, time bears little meaning. This is both to mark the transition from pre- to post-apocalyptic, but also to symbolize the resulting confusion and chaos. Most often, even if the characters know the time, they do nothing with the information as the world has changed so fundamentally. While of the analyzed novels, *The Stand* is a clear outlier as it calendars each day meticulously from start to finish, in both *The Road* and *Swan Song* the apocalypse is marked clearly as the passage of time is no longer recorded. In *The Road*, the only point where time is marked accurately is when the apocalypse is remembered: "The clocks stopped at 1.17. A long shear of light and then a serious of concussions" (54).

This is identical, if compressed, to *Swan Song*. The novel's first chapters are used to introduce the characters before the apocalypse, and present both time and place clearly:

> [Chapter] One
>
> July 16
>
> 10.27 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time
>
> Washington, D.C. (*Swan Song* 5)

After the nuclear heads strike, both time and place are lost, and each following chapter begins with only the chapter number. Time passed is both lost from readers and characters alike, and usually brought up only when in relation to survival: "Time passed. Josh judged its passage by the number of empty cans that were piling up […]. They went through one can of vegetables

every other day" (*Swan Song* 268). This is similar to *The Road*, where the boy fears that they are dying of starvation after several days of not finding food. "How long do you think people can go without food?" (106) the father asks as an attempt to convince that they'll make it: "It takes a long time. We have water. That's the important thing. You dont last very long without water" (106).

Skult makes it apparent in his work that the (post-post) modern post-apocalypse is often secular rather than religious, since the religious apocalypse does not usually have a continuation after the "end": some people simply ascend to heaven while others perish. Thus, it is interesting to see how the theme of religion comes across in so many post-apocalyptic novels. Skult only briefly touches upon the subject by mentioning the themes associated with the post-holocaust world: "an abandonment of sexual norms (particularly monogamy), a neobarbarian return with all its atrocities, the dissolution of democracy, the disappearance of technology and its rediscovery and, finally, the role of religion" (29).

The Stand and *Swan Song* both make the role of religion apparent, the clearest examples being characters resembling "God"/ "Jesus" or "Satan," these being Mother Abigail and Randall Flagg, as noted by Skult as well (32), and Swan and The Man with the Scarlet Eye. In both novels, the "good" characters are driven by dreams and visions to find their version of "God" or "Jesus," while the "bad" ones are commanded by "Satan" to destroy everyone else. The division is clear, as is the religious symbolism, as seen in *The Stand*, when the nuke goes off: "And the righteous and unrighteous alike were consumed in that holy fire" (1085). Eventually, it is through Mother Abigail and Swan, respectively, that society is rebuilt. After the evils of the world have been vanquished and a new society established, many of the characters decide to move somewhere else to rebuild the rest of the country.

This is not the only way in which religion manifests in the two novels. For instance, in *Swan Song*, when the "good guys"[1] finally establish a place of their own, one of their first acts is to bury their dead instead of dumping them into pits as they had done previously. This is brought up as one of the first—and thus most important—acts that make them a real society rather than a nameless group of nomads who care neither for themselves

[1] Even if the use of "good guys" and "bad guys" may seem like an overgeneralization, the novels use this wording when dividing their cast. *The Road* has the man and the boy explicitly discuss whether they are the good guys and in *Swan Song* and *The Stand* the two opposing factions and their aims are described clearly to show the difference between those that want to rebuild society and those that want to rule what little is left of the world. As later shown, there is little room for shades of grey in these post-apocalyptic novels and most are clearly either black or white, "good" or "bad".

nor each other. During the burial, one of the characters asks permission to read from the Bible as her husband had done (653). In the middle of rebuilding their society, religion is shown to be a significant part of it, in addition to the printing press, electricity, and other commodities.

The Road is likewise filled with religion, both in its descriptive narration –"[The boy] caught [a single gray snowflake] in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom" (15) – and in how the characters see each other and justify their actions. Lydia Cooper argues that the novel itself is a grail narrative, as the novel's early draft was named *The Grail*. According to Cooper, in one of the early drafts, "the boy seems to be an incarnation of fertility, a scene that explicates the novel's insistence that the boy be read as a life force, both literal and metaphorical. In the literal sense, the boy is his father's life force since the child's existence is inextricably linked to the man's survival" (226). When the man converses with Ely, the only named character in the novel,[2] the man says: "What if I said that he's a god?" (183). Interestingly, this ties the boy even closer to Swan in *Swan Song* as someone with the magical ability to bring the world back to life and who needs to be protected for the world to survive.

However, here we can see McCarthy's cynicism—or perhaps realism—in that there are no magical powers in the world. The world is more or less dead and all there is to do is to survive for as long as possible. Still, the metaphor is there. In all three novels, some greater (religious) power drives the characters to survive no matter how much they feel like giving up. The boy is the man's "warrant" (3) and they are "each the other's world entire" (4), which is how Swan's "protector" Josh views Swan: "*Protect the child.* Josh had heard it" (229, italics in original). These characters must protect their child because they believe in some sort of higher power that requires them to do so, even if it is sometimes unclear who and what the child is, at times questioning if they are a god or not, as quoted above. This is similar to the people chasing Mother Abigail, "God" incarnated, in *The Stand.*

Post-apocalyptical worlds are often as dangerous as the apocalypse itself is. Cities are brought to ruin or filled with the dead and evil forces are gathering. Yet most post-apocalyptic novels end on a positive note. In both *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, the "bad" guys are destroyed, and the world can be properly rebuilt again, hopefully this time without the fears and prejudice that caused the world to end in the first place. While most, if not all, of the

[2] When the man asks whether Ely is his real name, he says that it is not: "I couldnt trust you with it. To do something with it. I dont want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. […] I could be anybody" (182).

journey the man and the boy take is spent in misery and the man dies in the end leaving the boy alone, the novel finds a way to end on a hopeful note. After the father dies, his son is soon found by a group of survivors that want to take care of him. While perhaps the world has not been saved and made safe again, as it is in *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, the boy's continuing journey places *The Road* securely among many other post-apocalyptic novels that against all odds end on a positive note, implying that the end may not indeed be the end

With all the evidence presented, it is clear that *The Road* shares many similarities to other novels within the genre. However, when read more carefully, the novel begins to reveal how it also challenges and deviates from these themes. This is discussed next.

2.3. *The Road* as an Atypical Post-Apocalyptic Novel

One of the more obvious, unique qualities of *The Road* is the post-apocalypse itself and its ambiguity: the world has truly ended, and no one knows why or how. One of the only descriptions of what has happened is the already quoted: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (54). What has occurred during the years between this and the present day is equally left unexplained. The little that is revealed is often mentioned only by passing:

> Gray slush by the roadside. Black water running from under the sodden drifts of ash. No more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another. No one traveled this road. No roadagents, no marauders. After a while they came to a roadside garage. (*The Road* 15)

The Road avoids any conclusive evidence to the point, that even the books written on *The Road* have not found incontestable evidence of what happened. This vagueness is deliberate, since McCarthy answered the following when asked about what caused his disaster:

> CM: A lot of people ask me. I don't have an opinion. At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do? (*The Wall Street Journal*)

As stated by Skult, "one of the more common tropes of the genre, […] is moralizing on the cause and consequence of, for instance, nuclear war" (51), which *The Road* completely avoids. In comparison, *Swan Song* contemplates at great length on human anger and fear, and how they relate directly to world destruction. Furthermore, even if the post-apocalypse in *The Stand* is

more accidental than intentional, it discusses the circumstances that led to it and whether the survivors "may finish the job of destroying our species" (343). Post-apocalyptic novels often reflect on human nature and our shortcomings that lead to the apocalypse in the first place.

The ambiguity of what causes the end in *The Road* allows readers to project their own thoughts and fears into the narrative, as there is a clear gap in the narrative that must be filled, instead of it offering readers any criticism of its own. As Skult points out, some have mistakenly attributed the end to nuclear weapons (160), and Adeline Johns-Putra's essay analyzes how the novel has been read, including the arguments for a climate change reading. The uncertainty created in the novel allow the world of *The Road* to be the result of the readers', and not the author's, fears. While *Swan Song* and *The Stand* are tied to fears prevalent during the time of writing, *The Road* offers a unique possibility for the readers to determine for themselves what might have caused the end.

Details on time and place remain similarly ambiguous. It is impossible to decipher whether the events take place in the 1990s, during the time of its publication, in 2006, or in the near future. The few significant technological advancements that are mentioned are doomsday shelters, a soft drink machine, and telephones, all devices that have been around for some time and are unlikely to disappear soon. Even if the novel fails to mention inventions such as tablets and smartphones, which were not as common during the time the novel was written, it is just as easy to imagine the events occurring now as it might have been ten years ago. The novel goes to great lengths to show how everything has been reduced to rubble, and the few surviving shopping carts can be one of the most treasured valuables found. Everything from food to gas and bullets are running out and eventually nothing will be left.

Skult argues that "The space in post-apocalyptic novels [is] […] essential for placing the stories in their appropriate context" (78), as it is through this space that readers can imagine a world after. When the pre-apocalypse is established, the ruins both signal the passing of time and create an emotional impact on readers who see the familiar in a ruined state. Compared to the other already presented questions, where *The Road* is set, is easier to answer. While *The Road* is almost entirely devoid of names, the few that do appear (most notably the Rock City advertisement (20)) set it firmly in America. But this is not the America that we know, because it is made so unfamiliar and alien in its destruction that it bears no resemblance to any specific place. As quoted before, this is "a provocative rhetorical move that forces the

reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be" (Kunsa 62).

This specificity is important as it does not mean that the ruins in the novel do not resemble anything at all, but the opposite: the world is ruined so completely that it begins to look entirely uniform. All the mentioned elements of ambiguity, how the end comes to be, when and where it takes place, work together to establish a sense of universality. Rather than being fixed in a set location and time, such as *Swan Song* and *The Stand* do in their post-apocalyptic America, *The Road* attempts to create a narrative more open for the readers to fill in the blanks, especially on the questions of where, when and why.

The contrast is more obvious when looking at McCarthy's previous novels, such as *Blood Meridian*, where his commitment to historical accuracy in descriptions of cities and travel is one of the more major components of his narration: "He takes as pay from a farmer an aged mule and aback this animal in the spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine he rides up through the latterday republic of Fredonia into the town of Nacogdoches" (*Blood Meridian* 5). The ruins in *The Road* share a similar, if not even greater, amount of descriptive detail, leaving out only where it exactly takes place.

One reason for this is that names have lost their meaning and the boy even asks questions such as what state roads and states are (43). This question shows how complete the destruction of the world has been. The boy, born after the apocalypse, has no idea what these concepts are, and it makes no difference whether they are in a city that was once called New York or something else, as they have all been similarly devastated to a degree where their forgotten origin makes no difference. Similarly, the year, whether in the late 1900s, early 2000s, or at some other time, is left unspecified as it carries no meaning to this post-apocalyptic world. Ultimately, what was once can never be again.

While *The Road* attempts to create a world almost entirely removed from a specific time and place so the readers can either ignore those factors or fill in the details themselves, *Swan Song* and *The Stand* attempt to portray our world as we know it. In *Swan Song*, Sister Creep witnesses the destruction of New York and sees "the ruins of the structures […]. Tiffany's, Sister Creep realized" (157), while in *The Stand* it is Larry who witnesses the fall of New York and while looking down the balcony, sees "a dark pocket across 110th all the way to that end of Manhattan Island" (301). Both narrative styles, ambiguity and specificity, attempt to bring readers closer to the events but in crucially different ways. While *Swan Song*

and *The Stand* want readers to see familiar settings, such as New York, destroyed, *The Road* attempts to portray something more general, asking readers to imagine any and all cities ruined, perhaps even their own.

The Road begins *in medias res* on many levels; the man and the boy are already on their way to the coast, and the apocalypse has already happened. As Skult argues, "The purpose of the 'chronotope of the pre-apocalypse' is, in essence, to give the readers a grounded, familiar starting point, whence things go through an apocalyptic change, ending up in the new reality of the post-apocalypse" (71–72). Once again, this is what *The Road* is missing. Where novels such as *Swan Song* and *The Stand* have several chapters of the world and the life of the characters before the end, *The Road* does not. The importance of this is emphasized as Skult writes: "a post-apocalypse without a point of comparison in the preapocalypse is no longer post-apocalyptic, it is merely a tale about something fantastic and otherworldly […] without it, speaking of a 'post'-apocalypse is nonsense" (72).[3]

In *The Stand,* King depicts meticulously how the end comes about, by slowly changing the world while narrating multiple examples of the infection spreading: "Nevertheless, on her way down to the white room she infected an orderly, a doctor who was just getting ready to leave, and another nurse on her way to do her midnight rounds" (116). As established, in *The Road*, excluding a few brief and vague memories, readers are not shown the world before its end. It is effectively all gone and the man wonders "that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect" (163). In *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, the characters do all they can to re-establish society and the ways of the old world, such as finding a printing press in *Swan Song* (621), whereas the man in *The Road* decides that it is easier to forget. The old world is gone and there is no hope to bring it back.

Yet, the man remembers and so do the readers. It is through small details and memories that the past is rebuilt, such as when the man finds his old home and remembers where the stockings and the hedges were, while the boy simply "[w]atched shapes claiming [the man] he could not see" (26). The past is remembered by the man and the readers alike, but the boy is excluded. In this scene it is especially difficult to decipher whether the man speaks out loud or only thinks to himself. While the narration says: "This is where we used to have

[3] This is arguably what many of the recent Young Adult novels do when presenting what seems a science fictional environment, only to reveal later that it is in fact taking place on Earth.

Christmas when I was a boy" (26) no mention of "he said" is used before the boy pleads for them to leave, clearly indicating for the first time that something is said out loud. This leaves the possibility that the man only shares his past directly with the readers, as he knows that they will understand what the boy cannot.

In scenes such as these, we begin to see how the end is so significantly different from the other analyzed novels: the end truly seems to be the end. The boy is now almost ten years old and there are very few signs of life left. The few morsels and apples that the man and the boy find are shriveled and decaying, nothing that can be used reliably as a food source. Excluding cannibalism, canned food is almost the only source of nourishment, and there is only so much left. There are no permanent shelters that the man deems safe enough to stay in and even if they stayed longer in the bunker, at one point or another they would run out of food and be forced to leave. The world is barren and infertile. Even when the man dies and the boy is found by other "good guys," readers are left to wonder how positive such an end is. The boy's journey continues, but for how long? If there are no reliable food sources left, is there a society to re-establish, or is this just prolonging the inevitable?

There are several similarities in *Swan Song* as the post-apocalyptic landscape is similarly devoid of natural food sources, and the characters have to scavenge for the few remaining cans and jars of food (231, 354). Yet, there is still hope even before Swan resurrects the earth. There are several towns and groups of people that have managed to survive during the seven-year gap in the narrative, and even if it is hinted that gas and cans of food will eventually run out, there is no similar urgency that is found in *The Road*. In both *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, the end is hopeful, even if the supernatural evil[4] survives. In *Swan Song*, the sun comes out after The Man with the Scarlet Eye is defeated and Swan rejuvenates the earth. In *The Stand*, a new child is born with immunity to the disease, and unlike in the two other novels, the world of *The Stand* had not even been ruined in the first place, only people and animals have died. Unlike *The Road*, both leave the impression that humanity still has a chance to survive and start again. The good guys save the boy from immediate starvation and death by cannibals, but what happens next? *The Road* seems to suggest that scavenging is the only way to survive and eventually there will be the last can of food that they find, even if they do not know it, just as the man and Ely wonder how you would know if you were the last man on

[4] This can be read as the metaphorical evil in humanity.

earth: “Nobody would know it[, Ely said]. It wouldnt make any difference[, the man said]. When you die it’s the same as if everybody else did too” (180).

Yet, as mentioned earlier, it is not just the physical world that has come to an end, but other aspects of life before the apocalypse as well. The man tells stories to the boy and explains what things like Christmas and state roads were, but the further the novel progresses, the clearer it becomes that the boy cannot truly comprehend any of this. Father and son become alien to each other, each having a perception of the world that the other cannot comprehend. Considering the significance and the amount of religious imagery in the novel, it is interesting how a closer reading reveals that perhaps religion, too, belongs to one of the concepts that the boy either fails to understand or rejects as meaningless.

The man’s religious portrayal of the boy has been well documented, and some of the very first lines of the novel have the man depict him as “his warrant” and saying out loud to himself: “If [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke” (3). Religion keeps the man from giving up, as he prays to God and sees the boy as something holy, just as similarly the characters in *Swan Song* and *The Stand* find both relief and purpose from religion and religious figures. What is often left out, is that in *The Road* this religious imagery is almost exclusively limited to the man alone who describes his son with the help of religious imagery only from afar and to himself. Each previously quoted description of the boy is something that the man shares with only himself.

Even if the man sees the boy as something holy[5], this role is not discussed or shared in significant manner with the boy himself nor anyone else. The man tells the boy: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (80), but this is as far as the conversation is taken. The boy does not ask what it means that he was appointed by God to do that. In the boy’s eyes, this can just easily as be seen as a contract between a father and a son or a form of simple compassion and empathy: they need to take care of each other in order to survive.

When they discover the bunker full of food, the boy asks: “Do you think we should thank the people?” to which the man answers: “Well. Yes, I guess we could that” (154). The man asks the boy to thank them, to which the boy says that he doesn’t know how:

[5] If one agrees with Cooper’s reading of the novel as a grail narrative, the boy is even more than holy, just as Swan is.

> The boy sat staring at his plate. He seemed lost. The man was about to speak when he said: Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God. (*The Road* 154)

Yet, even here it is difficult to ascertain whether the boy believes in God and praying, or if this is merely something that he has seen the man do before.

The conversation is made more explicit, if only briefly, when Ely and the man talk about whether the boy is a God and then, why the boy gave him food:

> Maybe he believes in God [Ely said].
>
> I dont know what he believes in [the man said]. (*The Road* 185).

When the man and the boy shoot with a flare pistol into the ocean, the boy says: "They couldnt see it very far, could they, Papa?" When the man asks who he means, the boy answers "[A]nybody that you wanted them to know where you were." "Like God?" the man asks, to which the boy replies: "Yeah. Maybe somebody like that" (263).

In these scenes we see that the boy understands some concepts of religion, but there is doubt that even the man admits. This becomes even clearer when on last pages of the novel, the boy is told to have "tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time" (306).

While the novel does not delve deeper into the alienation felt by the boy and the other adults as the novel already ends, it does suggest throughout that religion has not stuck to the boy as it has to the older generation. Religion is often used as motivation to keep going and to rebuild society in post-apocalyptic novels, yet in *The Road* this is shown to be limited to those from the past world. In this new post-apocalyptic generation, symbolized by the boy, abstract concepts are constantly doubted and some even abandoned when they carry no meaning in this new world where only survival matters. If the boy cannot comprehend Christmas, how could he comprehend God that even at best only mutely watches them from afar? This raises more questions on just how different the world would be if it could ever return to normal. Would religions fade away with other abstract concepts? While the characters in *Swan Song* and *The Stand* strive to rebuild society the way they remember it being, the man realizes that in a world so different from what was, this is impossible. The boy talks to his dead father in a similar way that his father did to God, which begs the question, what would this new

world look like? Would humans revert to older rituals where an omnipotent but silent God would be replaced by those that passed away but were once intimately known?

Questions such as these are easy to miss, as the novel is told strictly from the man's point of view. Before his death, there is only one scene which is portrayed from the boy's point of view. While left alone, the boy believes he sees another boy of his age: "Come back, he called. I wont hurt you. He was standing there crying when his father came sprinting across the road and seized him by the arm" (88). The rest of the story is limited to the father's point of view until he dies and only the few remaining pages are told from the boy's perspective.

All the other analyzed novels, *Swan Song*, *The Stand*, and *Blindness*, have numerous characters who witness the end. Both *Swan Song* and *The Stand* spread out their characters across the map to show the different ways the apocalypse has impacted the country, and in both several characters are central to why the apocalypse happens in the first place. Portraying the apocalypse only through one point of view limits the experience significantly. While *The Road* manages to alleviate some of this by having the characters constantly travel and thus witness the country from almost coast to coast, the effect is undermined as these ruins are always experienced through the same eyes.

Despite the fact that *Blindness* limits the movement of its characters mostly to the asylum the central characters are locked in, the little that they witness is experienced through multiple characters that react in different ways. This allows the characters to argue about what they think is important, such as when the man with the black eyepatch appears with a radio. Some want to use the radio to listen to music, while the man with the black eyepatch says that it is meant only for news: "And a little music, insisted the girl with the dark glasses" (113). Meanwhile, in *The Road*, the man's word is all that is given to the readers. What he tells, whether that is about the apocalypse, his own past, or anything else, is all that the readers are given, and often he has the final word when discussing with the boy. Not even through conversation do we get to see other points of view as the man and the boy talk only to the one cannibal they face, Ely, the man who steals from them while they are on the beach, and the man's wife in the flashbacks.[6] Even of these, only the night spent with Ely produces any real discussion.

[6] There are a few more minor exchanges, but these reveal even less.

Almost everyone but the man and the boy are witnessed from afar and in short glimpses through the man's point of view. While many that they encounter can be easily identified as "bad", most notably the cannibals, there are others who are not as easily categorized, and the man himself belongs firmly into this ambiguous category. In the man's mind, there are no other good guys, no matter how much he wants the boy to believe so, a topic of multiple articles (see for example Pizzino, Johns-Putra, and others). While the father talks about other good guys to the boy, his actions are in direct contradiction to his words. Each time the boy tries to suggest that there could be good guys nearby, the father denies this, always choosing to avoid encountering others:

> What if some good guys came? [the boy asked]
>
> Well, I don't think we're likely to meet any good guys on the road
>
> We're on the road.
>
> I know. (*The Road* 160)

Still, the man insists on there being good guys:

> There are other good guys[, the boy said]. You said so.
>
> Yes.
>
> So where are they?
>
> They're hiding.
>
> Who are they hiding from?
>
> From each other.
>
> Are there lots of them?
>
> We dont know.
>
> But some.
>
> Some. Yes.
>
> Is that true?
>
> Yes. That's true.
>
> But it might not be true.
>
> I think it's true.
>
> Okay.
>
> You dont believe me.
>
> I believe you.
>
> Okay.
>
> I always believe you.
>
> I dont think so.

> Yes I do. I have to. (*The Road* 196–97)

What arguably makes it so difficult to grasp the contradiction in the man's actions is that there is no one besides the boy to challenge him, and the boy does not have the same authority as the man. It is easy for the readers to ignore the boy's words as childish naivety just as the man does. The man is doing everything he can to protect him; he would rather kill the boy than let him suffer, and if he would lose him, he would kill himself. How could he then be wrong?

Yet, it is precisely this moral conundrum that McCarthy delicately raises, but which can easily be missed. The boy alone wants to adopt other people into their group, but when his father, the focalizing character, is so strongly against it, it is easy to be inclined to believe that he is right not to let others join them. The narrative, and later the boy, begin to question the man and his actions as the novel progresses, and whether he is going too far and doing more harm than good by straying away from everyone else. What the boy will do when his father passes away is never fully thought out by the man, even when it is apparent to him that his son will not survive alone, and his own days are numbered. Just before dying, he admits that he was wrong: "I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant" (298). Surprisingly, and rather untypical for McCarthy, the father's failure to prepare the boy for when he is no longer there to take care of him, does not carry any repercussions. The boy is soon found by other survivors that not only talk about finding others, but act upon it. The abruptness of the ending makes it easy to believe that the man was right and his parenting choices were justified.

This sort of morality with no clear answers is largely left out from books such as *Swan Song* and *The Stand.* One of the most explicit, and only, times something akin to this arises is when in *Swan Song* a child tell his mother that he wants to be a soldier, only to be smacked for wanting to learn to kill. The child asks: "But… if there ain't any good soldiers, how do you keep the bad soldiers from winnin'?" To this, the mother has to admit: "She couldn't answer him. […] "I'll think about it," she said, and that was the best she could do" (815). The question is never returned to as the last major battle begins and most of the "good" guys are killed or captured by the "bad" guys.

However, the few characters who are more morally ambiguous, such as Harold in *The Stand*, are still presented in a multitude of ways. Harold is first introduced through Fanny's point of view, then Stu's, and eventually given his own point of view, and even glimpses of his own diary: "He hadn't thought he had so much hate in him" (681). While most

readers will most likely see Harold's evil long before he acts upon it, there are instances where others try to understand him, such as when Stu meets him for the first time: "[Harold] wasn't just jealous of the girl, that had been a bad oversimplification on [Stu's] part" (392).

Because of the limited perspective in *The Road*, it is difficult to identify the complexity and the contradiction between the man's words and actions. At first, he can easily be categorized as good, but the more he is analyzed, the more the cracks begin to show. If not for the surprising positive ending, the question would be easier to answer. The man's insistence to avoid everyone else might protect the boy as long as he is alive, but what happens when he is not there? The man tells the boy: "You're going to be lucky. I know you are" (299), which leaves the boy very little to hold on to when he finally passes away.

During the man's last moments, the boy asks about the little boy that he believes to have seen before he was forcefully pulled away by the man. Now the man answers: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (300), when all this time he has avoided not just other people but answering the boy's questions. The two following segments after seeing the little boy end with the boy asking questions that the father does not answer: "What about the little boy?" (90). Now dying, the man believes, or at least wants the boy to believe, that there are still good guys like them, but in reality, no one that they find has ever been good enough for him. As Johns-Putra states, "Other good guys do not exist in the man's ethical universe" (533), and, I would add, not as long as he has to take care of the boy. In his eyes, everyone else is a threat, it was he who was appointed by God to take care of him and he alone. Other good guys are found only in "[o]ld stories of courage and justice" (42), but these are just stories that even the boy begins to understand. The scene with the little boy is never resolved, whether the boy truly saw someone and if he did, was he with others or alone, yet it does not matter. The man's actions imply that if he, too, had seen the boy, he would have still chosen to run away, which makes it even more absurd that when dying, he believes that goodness will find his son, when he will not do the same for others.

Every other person that they come across is seen as an immediate threat to be avoided, and most of the time rightly so, as they face robbers and cannibals multiple times. The man is not willing to give anyone a chance and it is the boy alone who attempts to help those they meet while the man insists that they push along: "Cant we help him? Papa?" (51). Even when meeting Ely and carrying almost more food than they can push, the man does not think that "he should have anything" (175). In the man's eyes, it is every man for himself. There is

no goodness in people. When they catch the thief who had stolen everything they had, the man leaves the thief naked on the road fully knowing that he will end up dying there. The man tells the child to stop crying as he is not the one who has to worry about everything. To this, the boy replies: "Yes I am […]. I am the one" (277).

Even though the post-apocalyptic wastelands in the analyzed novels are roamed by violent and dangerous survivors, finding others that they can group up with is still one of the major themes and motivations of the characters. Rebuilding society is arguably the most important long-term goal of the survivors which requires others that they can rely on. In both *Swan Song* and *The Stand* the characters meet other good guys on their journey so they can eventually settle down as a group.

The Road is unique in that its main character presents such a distrusting attitude towards others, that no other people are ever considered to be added to their group. The man believes so firmly that he was "appointed by God" (80) to protect the boy, that he will rather push others away than take any risks. In the two cases where they find signs of other "good guys", the small boy and the dog, both signs that if they haven't been eaten, they are unlikely to be among cannibals, the man's reaction is always to flee. The man refuses to find and establish any form of community with others and in his view, he is alone with the boy against the rest of the dying world. This sets *The Road* clearly apart from other post-apocalyptic novels as it is often the crucial first step of surviving to find others that they can trust. This contradiction between insisting that there are good guys but not believing you can find them, is one of the most intriguing issues in *The Road*. Were the novel told from another point of view, the man could even be seen as the "bad guy" to others, but this perspective is never given and is only implied by the increasing amount of doubt that the son brings up.

Yet, even if the man's actions have at times been questioned by readers, the novel is mostly read as one of unquestioning parental love. Could another parent really condemn the man for his actions when he is simply doing everything he can to protect his child? That these actions cripple him from making wise decisions might not be that McCarthy attempted to portray a villain as a hero, but that he wanted to portray the man as almost painful human character who might end up doing bad and foolish things because he does not know what else to do in the circumstances that he finds himself in. In the world of *The Road*, what is good, what is evil anymore?

This distrust of others is connected to movement, another motif that at first glance seems to fit into the post-apocalyptic genre, but when analyzed more carefully, avoids it. Movement is most often motivated by hope. This hope comes across as finding both food and shelter, but also finding other people. The beginning of the novel lays out their task: "They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here" (2), yet soon it becomes clear how unlikely it is to find anything better. The boy reaffirms with the father that they are going South "So we'll be warm" (9) to which the man answers yes. Soon after, the man reveals his own doubts: "He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it" (29). Each page from there on makes it ever more doubtful that anything will change, and the child's hope seem only that, hope against all hope: "The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be?" (55).

The hopelessness of the dying world, made clear on the first pages, "Barren, silent, godless" (2), is consistent throughout the novel, and gives very little hope to the characters. Both the readers and the man become increasingly aware of how unlikely it will be that the two will ever find a permanent safe haven. Rather than providing real hope of finding a home where they could live, movement becomes a refusal to give up. The man's refusal to stay in one place also begs the question; what would be enough? If a bunker full of food and warmth is not safe enough to stay in for more than few days, what is?[7]

While in the other analyzed novels, movement has an end goal, an imagined space where a community could be built or something more intangible, such as finding the reason for Swan to have survived in *Swan Song*, there is no such goal in *The Road*. At a certain point, constantly moving becomes pointless, as Paul makes it clear after years of travel in *Swan Song*: "I, for one, am pretty damned lazy. I don't want to go on the road again – and so I'm sticking right here" (801). In *The Road,* movement remains as the only goal, and the hope that movement gives is not in finding a place where they can finally settle down. For the man, staying in one place will always signify death. No place is deemed safe enough nor is anyone considered trustworthy enough, so they keep moving until they cannot do it anymore.[8] Were it

[7] In fact, Ely says: "I was always on the road. You cant stay in one place" (179). This suggests same mentality as the man, that staying in move is the only way to survive. Many groups met throughout the novel are likewise on the move, yet there are several camps that they come across, one being the cannibals with the basement, the other being a high-rise building where they see fire: "Who are they, Papa? I dont know" (86).

[8] Interestingly, in both *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, settling down and building a community leads to an attack from the "the bad guys" and to numerous deaths. Only after the other force is defeated in the climactic battle, does the built community provide safety.

not for the highly atypical ending for McCarthy, the main characters in *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men, Cities of Plain*,[9] *The Counselor*,[10] and *Child of God*, all face agonizing deaths at the end, the man's failures to take care of his son, his sole purpose in his own words, would have been easier to identify. Now we are left with false hope as the boy finds a new, larger group for himself, but as with everything else in *The Road*, the more this is considered, the less hopeful it truly seems.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

McCarthy's ambiguity is taken to another level in *The Road* when readers who want answers are forced to fill many of the gaps found in the narrative. While other post-apocalyptic novels, such as the three other analyzed novels, often chronicle what happened before and after the apocalypse to show the drastic change the world suffers, *The Road* begins long after the apocalypse has already happened, and the father is coughing blood, his days already numbered. How it all led here and what happened is irrelevant.

The little that is ever revealed of the apocalypse is so ambiguous that it might as well mean meteors, nuclear strikes, heavenly retribution, or anything else one can imagine. Whether the quoted series of concussions is even the moment it all ended or just one of many is never answered. What has happened after the boy's birth is revealed only in passing with little to no interest to expand upon it. When the man catches the thief, he notices: "[The thief] was an outcast from one of the communes and the fingers of his right hand had been cut away. He tried to hide it behind him. A sort of fleshy spatula" (273), and earlier when the man threatens the cannibal with a gun, the cannibal replies: "You aint got but two shells. Maybe just one" (67). From details like these, readers in need off answers can attempt to deduce that the thief was not from a cannibal community, but from some other community that the man is aware of but actively avoids, and that there has been so much fighting that one can safely assume that guns have become obsolete as no one has any ammunition.

While very few questions raised in the narrative are given definitive answers, what happened to the world, when, or who the man is, just as few theories can be excluded by the narrative. The flexibility of its ambiguity defines *The Road* and separates it from the other

[9] The last novel in the *Crossing* trilogy.
[10] A movie written by Cormac McCarthy and directed by Ridley Scott in 2013.

post-apocalyptical novels analyzed, which attempt to chronicle a carefully planned out series of events that lead to the apocalypse and the world after it. In these novels, how and why the world ended is almost as important as what it now means and the way people react to it, to what extent they have to go to survive in the wasteland.

While the many narrative gaps in *The Road* can be thought of as a puzzle for the readers to decipher, it is not necessarily the right way to think about it. As McCarthy himself said in an interview: "[I]t could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?" (*Wall Street Journal*). *The Road* is the story of a man and a boy in a horrible situation, while all else is unimportant, even the post-apocalypse itself.

The narrative gaps have led some critics to work "hard to imbue the narrative [of *The Road*] with some kind of meaningful, redemptive framework" (Skult 148), which the novel seemingly begs for. The vague descriptions are not limited to just the world, but to the man as well.[11] While some readers, such as Kunsa, argue that "the reader has greater access to the father's thoughts than to those of any other McCarthy character, and as a result he is rounder, fuller and more sympathetic" (62), I would argue that this is limited mostly to his love for his son. To say that "[the man] is someone the reader can imagine chatting with every morning before work at the bus stop, were this a world with jobs and bus stops", is taking this too far, as nothing of the man is really revealed (Kunsa 62). He can easily be called sympathetic, which I would argue is one of the main functions of the narrative as the novel is dedicated to McCarthy's son, but almost nothing else is known. One can wish to talk to someone *like* the man and imagine him being nice company, but to know what he would answer to queries outside the apocalypse, seems too generous. Even if this were the case, how different would the man be in a world that had not been ruined by an apocalypse? It is not just the boy who does not have connection to the world before, but the man himself as the few memories he has begin to fade.

The few flashbacks that the man has about his life before the apocalypse are left purposely vague to evoke more of a sense of emotion than attempting to actually tell the story of this man in particular as a character, such as *Swan Song* and *The Stand* do in both the extensive opening chapters and later in the story. In *The Stand*, when Mother Abigail is finally

[11] This applies to every other character in the novel as well. Ely is the only one properly introduced, but even he says the same thing as the man does, "I'm not anything" (67), only in other words: "I could be anybody" (182).

given her own first chapter, the twenty or so pages are used to tell her life story, from how she was born in 1882 to how she was once bitten by a weasel, and if it had been rabid, "she would have died one of the most horrible deaths" (503). Only a fraction of this relates to the apocalypse as it is mostly meant to establish who Mother Abigail is. What the man remembers is nothing of the like. His memories rarely include any spoken words, only the feeling: "The lake dark glass and windowlights coming on along the shore. A radio somewhere. Neither of them had spoken a word. This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (12).

The man's wife is seen only in flashbacks that mostly focus on the apocalypse, the boy's birth, and how some years later the wife decided to kill herself. These are told with the same amount of detail as the present-day narration is, but the few memories that the man has of his wife before the apocalypse are left as ambiguous as any other memory:

> He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theater with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and scones and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stocking through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned. (*The Road*, 18)

Memories presented this way might be thought to give subtle clues on what the man was like and what his life was before the apocalypse, just as when the man threatens the cannibal by saying: "To hear [the gunshot] you will need a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus and you wont have them anymore", which leads the cannibal to ask "Are you a doctor" (67). Both can be used to conclude something about the man, that he went to the theater and that he knows how the human body works, but they are not there for that reason. The man's occupation is never revealed because the story is not about a doctor from New Mexico who loves theater, but a story of a father, perhaps any father, who would do everything and anything to protect his child. That is why the man answers to the cannibal: "I'm not anything" (67).

The memories are there to show the readers a bittersweet moment remembered. In truth, the scene tells nothing of the man and his wife, because nothing too specific is meant to be known about them. The memory is more about color and beauty, of touch, a memory that one is reluctant to forget but that begins to slip away one detail at a time: first scent, followed by all else. Similarly, the perfect day on the lake has no dialogue with the man's uncle because the two are unimportant and the uncle is never explored as a character. Instead, the memory is

of the serene lake and the nature around it. While not all readers have experienced these moments specifically, they can see the beauty and contrast it to the cold world the man and the boy currently inhabit.

Who they are and why they are there, or what happened to the world, is not important for McCarthy. The function of the post-apocalypse is that it allows McCarthy to ask his main character questions that should never have to be asked: How far would you go to save your son from being eaten alive? "Could you crush that beloved skull [of your son] with a rock" (120). Other details are unimportant in the face of questions such as these. The world and the characters are not meant to have a proper history behind them, and it is not that the man's occupation, family history, political opinions or even past life, are not fleshed out, but that they would not make a difference if they were. As said by Kunsa, McCarthy has given as much detail to his setting as he always has, and he has deliberately chosen to leave out the names of the places they visit. The only thing that matters in this new world is that he is a father, whereas everything else, even his name, has lost its meaning. How little the past means is slowly revealed as the boy becomes more and more distant and the man stops telling these stories as they serve no meaning anymore. The few vague memories that evoke feelings of longing are shared privately with the readers.

At first, *The Road* seems to share almost all of the major concepts found in other post-apocalyptical novels, but the more carefully it is read, the more obvious it becomes how little interest there is to any of it, and how almost all of it is eventually subverted. The ending is hopeful only until one considers the world the boy remains in. Religion offers meaning and hope until one realizes how the boy fails to adopt it and how it allows the man to justify his actions that could be regarded as immoral from another point of view. Movement symbolizes the quest for hope until one realizes that for the man, no such hope exists. He believes in the good guys, until he is forced to point out who they really are. Almost all of this is revealed solely through the boy who for most of the narrative is never given a point of view nor authority. At first glance, *The Road* seems to offer a black-and-white world where some are good guys who carry the fire, and others are bad guys and eat people, but the more thought is given to it, the more obvious it becomes how things are not as simple.

Yet, as little as the specifics seem to matter to McCarthy, *The Road* can be considered even more of a post-apocalyptic novel than either *Swan Song* or *The Stand.* While *Swan Song* and *The Stand* chronicle in extreme detail how the end came and what happened

right after it, of these novels *The Road* can be said to be most interested in the effects of the post-apocalypse. The two other novels have significant portions focusing on matters completely unrelated to the apocalypse, whether that is the personal histories of the characters, chasing religious manifestations, or fighting wars quite unrelated to the actual post-apocalypse. In comparison, it is difficult to find a page in *The Road* that does not in some way relate directly to the post-apocalypse, whether that is finding food or warmth or avoiding bad guys who are doing the exact same thing.

In Lydia Cooper's reading of *The Road* as a grail narrative, she states that "[t]he fantastic elements in the novel, however, are not supernatural allegory, but mythological motif" (219), and while the final version of the novel moves away from this as some of the more explicit evidence of a grail narrative have been removed, as pointed out by Cooper herself, the drafts reveal something about the nature of the narrative. *The Road* takes place in a timeless world far removed from ours, and not just *post*-apocalypse, but before it as well. The novel is deliberately written so that it is near impossible to definitively answer almost any of the questions that concern what has happened and when, or who the man is. All of that is unimportant for the narrative. Instead, the post-apocalypse is used as a setting that allows McCarthy to tell a story that could not otherwise be told. While a significant amount of detail is given to the description of destruction, the focus and purpose of the narrative relies on the relationship between the man and the boy, a father and a son, which makes *The Road* more allegorical than the typical genre novel. The details should not be focused on too much as the characters themselves say, they could as well be anything and nothing.

3. *Blindness* as Post-apocalyptic Fiction

3.1 *Blindness*

In *Blindness,* a country is suddenly struck by a disease that causes people to become blind, seeing nothing but white. Beginning first from one man that turns blind while waiting for traffic lights, it begins to spread to everyone who he is in contact with. What causes the blindness and how it spreads remains unanswered throughout the novel. Many of the characters remain hopeful, thinking "[t]his blindness is so abnormal, so alien to scientific knowledge that it cannot last for ever" (51). Those who are infected first are brought into an out of use insane asylum to be isolated from the rest of the population to ensure that the blindness does not spread. The story follows closely those who are taken in first, among them the doctor's wife, who is inexplicably the only one immune to the blindness. She decides to keep this a secret from others, to avoid becoming a servant to the other blind.

The military are brought in to ensure that the blind stay in place. They give clear instructions on what to do inside as they provide food and sanitary products while trying to figure out how to control the epidemic. The army makes it clear that were anyone of them to get sick or die, they will refuse to enter the premises. However, even when there are only a dozen people in the asylum, they are never provided with enough food, and soon after as more people are brought, more problems begin to arise concerning food and sanitation. More people are crammed into the asylum than it can comfortably hold, and the food provided can feed only a handful of them. One of the internees tries to get help, since a wound he received is getting infected. When he approaches the gate, he is shot. There are brief glances outside the asylum and the blindness is seen to have spread even among some of the soldiers who are taken into a separate facility. Inside the asylum, a group of men that have managed to smuggle in a gun have taken all the food. Now in control, they demand to get all the valuables, such as jewelry and cash, from the other internees and to give food based on the value. Soon after, they demand to receive the women—who they plan to rape—as payment. As the raping continues, the doctor's wife infiltrates another group of women and kills the man who has the gun. This initiates a shockwave of events as the hoodlums refuse to give any more food and the military has completely stopped sending packages. The other blind internees attack the hoodlums

unsuccessfully and then one of the girls that the doctor's wife saved from being raped burns down the abode of the thieves and, in the process, the whole asylum. Some of the internees escape the fire, shouting to the soldiers not to shoot, only to realize that there are no guards anymore—the soldiers are gone, presumably all gone blind.

In the last section of the book, the doctor's wife, having now revealed to others that she can see, escorts her group back to the city where they find it in a state of ruin. Blind men and women are wandering around, trying to find food and shelter. The little food that has not turned bad is running out. They stay the nights in their old houses trying to figure out how to survive in this new world. Just as the doctor's wife is getting too tired to carry on, to save all her friends, the story ends as the blind regain their sight, again as inexplicably as they lost it. The novel ends with people rejoicing their freedom.

In 2004 (translated into English in 2006), the novel was followed by a sequel, *Seeing*, that is set in the same country facing yet again another grave disaster. The novel begins with a parliamentary election and as the results come in, the government sees that more than seventy percent has cast blank votes. This plunges the government into a crisis that soon leads them to announce martial law and the government flees from the capital while trying to figure out the reason for the blank voters and what to do with them. *Blindness* is the only of the four novels analyzed that has received a sequel, but its focus is largely different. This is why I ignore *Seeing* in my main analysis of *Blindness*. I will, however, come back to it in my conclusions in order to demonstrate the way Saramago presents his ideas.

As a highly atypical post-apocalyptic novel, *Blindness* can be argued not to fit the genre. This is analyzed first and after that the features that suggest it still firmly belongs to it.

3.3 *Blindness* as an Atypical Post-Apocalyptic Novel

Like *The Road*, *Blindness* chooses to use a limited point of view to present the story and the world. The main characters have their own first chapters to show what happened just before they are blinded, but after the doctor is infected, the story is limited mostly to him and his wife. They are then taken to the asylum to be quarantined. Here they meet the rest of the protagonists and the main part of the story involves the internees trying to survive and make sense of their captivity and disability. As in *The Road*, this limited scope both in point of view, and book

length, is a significant difference to novels such as *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, that make the apocalypse an epic in scope and length. Even though *The Stand* has the end of the world come in to play fully only after three-hundred pages, it is still only less than one quarter into the story, as the novel is more than 1300 pages long. In *Swan Song*, another thousand-page novel, the apocalypse begins already a hundred pages in. In comparison, in *Blindness* the characters realize the true extent of the apocalypse only after two thirds of the novel, when there is just about a hundred pages left. In this way, *Blindness* only briefly examines the extent and effects of the end of the world. The focus of the narrative is on the internees, which is an examination of the people living in their micro-society, and how blindness affects them in such extreme conditions. While the effects of blindness expand further than the asylum and many of the conflicts that the internees face arise directly from the collapse of society, most of this happens elsewhere. The focus is strictly on the asylum and what happens outside is shared as rumors.

There are instances where the narrator reveals something happening outside the asylum, such as when a phone call between the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Defense is shown:

> Would you like to hear the latest news, [the Ministry of Defense said] that colonel we mentioned earlier has gone blind, It'll be interesting to see what he thinks of that bright idea of his now [the Ministry of Health said], He already thought, he shot himself in the head, Now that's what I call a consistent attitude, The army is always ready to show an example. (*Blindness* 104)

Later, when the old man with the black eyepatch arrives, he tells others what has happened outside the premises: "In the first twenty-four hours, he said, if the rumour going round was true, there were hundreds of cases, all alike, all showing the same symptoms, all instantaneous" (114). Soon after the old man with the black eyepatch has begun his tale, the narrator takes over:

> From this point onwards, apart from a few inevitable comments, the story of the old man with the black eyepatch will no longer be followed to the letter, being replaced by a reorganized version of his discourse, re-evaluated in the light of a correct and more appropriate vocabulary. The reason for this previously unforeseen change is the rather formal controlled language, used by the narrator, which almost disqualifies him as a complementary reporter, however important he may be, because without him we would have no way of knowing what happened in the outside world, as a complementary reporter, as we were saying, of these extraordinary events, when as we know the description of any facts can only gain with the rigour and suitability of the terms used. (*Blindness* 115)

The narrator's detailed description of events occurring outside the asylum lasts for several pages before it returns to the limited point of view of the internees who have no way of knowing what is happening outside. Later, the old man with the black eyepatch who has been listening for news in the radio realizes that "[t]he only radio station he had been able to get on the set [got] silent" (147).

Yet, even with all these signs that the whole society, and the world at large, is crumbling outside the asylum, the illusion of everything being under control remains, both for the characters and readers. Much later, when the doctor's wife returns from taking revenge on the rapist, "she could just make out the shadow of a soldier who was keeping guard. There are still people out there, people who can see" (183).

It is only about two thirds into the novel, when the fire spreads and the internees are forced to flee outside, still afraid of getting shot, that they realize that the army is not there anymore. Now free, some still cling to the hope that the Red Cross will save them. As the doctor's wife takes her group back to the city in the hopes of finding food, the city is finally shown: "The streets are deserted, either because it is still early, or because of the rain that is becoming increasingly heavy. There is litter everywhere, some shops have their doors open, but most of them are closed, with no sign of life inside, nor any light" (209).

It is in this way that *Blindness* may deviate perhaps most from the post-apocalyptic genre: the apocalypse happens not only elsewhere, but the fact that it has happened can even be a surprise for readers. *Blindness* has similarities to *The Stand* in that the apocalypse comes in the form of a contagious disease, but *The Stand* maps out in almost painstaking detail how the disease spreads and ruins cities, "Harry, a gregarious man who liked his job, passed the sickness to more than forty people during that day and the next" (72). *Blindness,* on the other hand, offers only a few glimpses of the situation spiraling out of control before returning to the characters, who have been confined from the rest of the world and have their own more immediate problems to cope with. However, the narrator in *Blindness* proves to have access to unlimited information quite frequently, such as when the escaped internees come across people in the city. Here he notes that "these people are waking up more or less at the same time as morning, that is because some of them only went blind a few days ago and still have not entirely lost their sense of succession of days and nights" (210). Still, he chooses to focus strictly on the doctor's wife and her friends, rather than on the deterioration of society as a whole, as *The Stand* and *Swan Song* do by making their characters witness all the ruins left by the apocalypse.

In *Blindness*, the main characters and their experiences are in the center of the narrative, but they are not in the center of the apocalypse, which is often the role of the main characters of post-apocalyptical stories. The main characters in *The Stand* and *Swan Song* have not only survived the apocalypse, but belong to the few who have survived and witnessed it, whether finding themselves in the middle of a field where nuclear missiles are being launched in *Swan Song*, or seeing everyone else die around them in *The Stand*. Because of the limited focus that is specifically not on the increasing panic and chaos of the society, the apocalypse on a social scale seems like a natural conclusion to the white sickness that is infecting everyone, rather than the driving force of the story. The story examines how people would survive if everyone went blind, and how society would react to it, but it does not chronicle its downfall and possible reconstruction as the main conflict, which is the main plot in both *Swan Song* and *The Stand*. Thus, questions such as how and when the soldiers disappeared from the asylum, and how the city reacted as a whole to the inevitable destruction, are left unanswered as they are treated as uninteresting in comparison to the immediate, personal tragedy the doctor's wife and her companions are experiencing.

Even if most of such issues can be deciphered from the text, the question of when and where this is taking place are left entirely unanswered. The story takes place in an unnamed country at an unspecified time. It was adapted into a film in 2008 and during the press run, the director of the movie, Fernando Meirelles, said: "You also never think the story happens in a contemporary time -- you think maybe it's the '30s or '40s -- and you don't know where it takes place. My first thought was to set the movie in the 1940's" (*Hollywood Reporter*). Just as in *The Road*, all the novel's characters remain unnamed. In the doctor's wife group, for example, there is the girl with the dark glasses, the boy with the squint, the first blind man, and the man with the black eyepatch. The only proper nouns mentioned in the novel are the Bible (102) and the Red Cross (207).[12]

Blindness shares *The Road's* explanation in how names have lost their meaning, as shown when new internees are brought in: "[I]t seemed he was about to give his name, but what he said was, I'm a policeman, and the doctor's wife thought to herself, He didn't give his name, he too knows that names are of no importance here. Another man was introducing himself, Number two, and he followed the example of the first man, I'm a taxi-driver" (57).

[12] Additionally, there is one reference to a biblical story in a description: "He [the old man with the black eyepatch] heard them come in, he knew they had been naked, and if he knew all this it was not because he had suddenly regained his sight and, like the other old men, crept up to spy on not one Susanna in her bath, but on three" (267).

The characters are not the only ones left unnamed, as even the country in which the events occur is not mentioned. The namelessness, and arguably even timelessness, is a crucial part of the story for Saramago as revealed in the interviews concerning the film adaptation. The movie was shot in multiple cities, mostly in Sao Paulo, whose "relative anonymity fits with Saramago's insistence that the story's location be made as generic as possible" (*LA Times*). According to Fernando Meirelles, they were the first to be allowed to film the movie precisely because they agreed with Saramago that it should take place in an unrecognizable location. Indeed, even filming the movie in English was done mostly for accessibility reasons.

In comparison, *Swan Song* and *The Stand* firmly take place in the United States to the point that they are at times looking at the apocalypse's effects on a single state, and while *The Road* removes state and city names, it is still apparent that it is taking place in the US. *The Road's* namelessness alone makes it easier to approach this strange America to those unfamiliar with the specific states and cities, but it is in *Blindness* where we see the complete removal of all specific details, the focus being strictly on how people in general would react to an impending apocalypse, in the form of blindness. Unlike other post-apocalyptic novels that rely on familiar landmarks that are then turned to ruins, *Blindness* focuses solely on the human aspect. There is a city, decision-makers in the form of ministers, an army, and people who inhabit it, but who they are, where or even when it takes place, are unimportant.

Fairly early on in *Blindness*, a strange blind man explains that he became blind while being in a museum while looking at a painting. The others ask what the paintings were like and reply to his descriptions: "[s]ounds like a Dutch painter" and "[i]n that case it must be by a Spanish painter." Finally they guess that it must have been an English painter, only to conclude: "What I don't understand is how in one painting there should be so many pictures and by such different painters, And there were some men eating, There have been so many lunches, afternoon snacks and suppers in the history of art, that this detail in itself is not enough to tell us who was eating" (123). Thus, they seem to comment on the novel itself and how it might first have details from a certain country and then from another, yet never enough so one could decide where it takes place. Whereas *The Stand* and *Swan Song* both depict a ruined city that is not just like New York, but in fact is New York, *Blindness* leaves the specifics of the environment completely for the reader to fill out or perhaps more aptly, to ignore. Even if *The Road*, too, leaves the cities unnamed, it shows their ruins in great detail, whereas in *Blindness* even unspecified ruins are withheld until the end of the story. This makes the setting feel both

unimportant and important. The city is not fleshed out and thus it could be any city, but at the same time, it could truly be any city, even the reader's own.[13]

To further emphasize the unimportance of ruins on a national scale, *Blindness* features almost no movement at all. Many post-apocalyptical novels are often written in the style of a travelogue in order to present as many ruins and differences to the world before as possible. In fact, all the other presented novels have this as the main goal of the characters as they try to find an environment better suited for them. In contrast, the main characters in *Blindness* are restrained in the asylum. Only when the asylum burns down, do they move into the city, but even this segment is relatively short. Within the city, they travel from one apartment to another, and later debate whether they should move to the country and find a farm as they are running out of food, but due to regaining their sight, they never realize this plan.

Limiting the movement of the characters removes almost completely one of the main tropes of the genre, forcing the characters to focus on other issues at hand, mainly the challenge of survival. Movement not only brings variation to the settings, but it often gives the survivors hope and motivation to carry on. Although the man in *The Road* knows in his heart that their journey will most likely be fruitless, the glimmer of hope that the sea is still there and that they could live there gives him enough motivation to keep moving. The last pages of *Blindness* feature the familiar discussion on if they should move to find a place where they hope they could live, but it is never fully realized as the story ends.[14] This emphasizes Saramago's interest not in presenting different ruins and the state of decay that the apocalypse has brought, but rather in the characters' survival where they currently are.

Blindness seems to ignore religion when compared to the other novels presented in this study. Religion is often used as one of the key aspects of society when the "good guys" begin to rebuild the world in these works. In *Blindness*, none of this comes up in relation to society or survival. As mentioned, the Bible is the only other feature mentioned in the story

[13] This deliberate misguiding of where it all takes place is taken even further in the sequel *Seeing* that happens in the same city. The narrator will frequently give humorous and misleading comments on where it could happen such as in the following examples: "Men and women of Portugal, that last word, we hasten to add, only appears due to the entirely gratuitous supposition […]. It was merely an illustrative example, nothing more," (82) and "It will not have gone unnoticed, by particularly exacting readers and listeners, that the narrator of this fable has paid scant, not to say non-existent, attention to the place in which the action described, albeit in rather leisurely fashion, is taking place" (100).

[14] Even if it is left unsaid in the novel, the story suggests same hopelessness as *The Road* does even if they were to move to the country. The doctor's wife is the only one who can see and thus capable of doing anything properly, and she is growing tired. Even if they managed to find their way to the country, it is unlikely that the doctor's wife alone could provide for all of them alone for long, whether there was a farm with food or not.

together with the Red Cross, but when looked at in context, there is no interest in religion per se. The internees discuss how they could pass the time, concluding "'[H]ow fortunate we would be if someone knew the Bible by heart, we could repeat everything since the creation of the world" (103). The Bible is mentioned here because it is widely known as perhaps the only book that some people do know by heart, not because religion itself would provide any stronger relief to the characters who find no need to pray to God even during this calamity. In the last pages of the novel, the doctor's wife, tired and broken by the stress of having to take care of so many, sees a church in the distance and decides to go there to rest, but once again, religion itself is not the main point, but rather what it symbolizes, here the sense of calm and relief that churches provide: "She did not want to lie down on the filth in the street, or return to the supermarket, not even dead. She looked around. On the other side of the street, a bit further on, was a church. There would be people inside, as everywhere, but it would be a good place to rest, at least it has always had been" (298). Neither the characters nor the narrator find it necessary to bring religion in-to the equation, which makes the novel stand out in post-apocalyptic fiction that often includes it as a major theme.

The focus on *how* people would react to this sudden disease is emphasized by the lack of interest in the disease itself. Nothing of the white sickness is ever revealed, it simply begins as a man drives a car and is struck blind and then continues to spread it those around him. What can be concluded is that some sort of contact with the contaminated is needed for the blindness to spread, since the first ones to go blind are those that meet the first blind man shortly after he lost his sight, but how it occurs, is never answered nor fully explored. The characters themselves lament that "this blindness is so abnormal, so alien to scientific knowledge that it cannot last for ever. And suppose we were to stay like this for the rest of our lives, Us, Everyone, That would be horrible, a world full of blind people, It doesn't bear thinking about" (51). This is not the only instance that draws attention to the fantastic and unbelievable aspect of the story on the one hand, and describes it as unimportant (as nothing can be learned of it), on the other.

Later, the narrator states that "These observations of a psychological nature, whose subtlety has no apparent relevance considering the extraordinary scale of the cataclysm which our narrative is struggling to relate, only serve to explain why all the blind internees were awake so early" (91). Here the narrator points out how seemingly backwards it is to focus on such minute details in the shadow of such exceptional events that have led to this reality. At the same time, the narrator makes it clear that this nonetheless will be the narrative's focus. The

notion that *Blindness* is merely looking at how this white sickness would affect people as a thought experiment is made even more explicit when everyone regains their sight just as inexplicably as they lost it. The last scenes of the city are of people rejoicing their recovery and freedom, everything returning to normal. How all this happened and where it now leads is unimportant as the experiment has exhausted its interest.

Why the apocalypse occurs is one of the crucial aspects of the genre, as it can work as a commentary on possible risks that we are facing in the future, whether that is nuclear war or manufactured diseases, but just as in *The Road*, the why and how do not matter. How it changes people and where it leads to, is what matters and it is on the last pages of the novel that Saramago states the novel's central moral so clearly that it was omitted from the movie as it was thought to be too heavy-handed; at this point the symbolism should already be clear to the viewer, as explained by the screenwriter Don McKellar (*Creative Screenwriting Magazine*, as quoted in the Wikipedia article). On the last pages, the doctor and his wife discuss the blindness, concluding: "Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see" (309).

Such stripping of metaphors to their core is found in some ways in all of the analyzed novels, The Man with the Scarlet Eye is described as the devil, Mother Abigail and Randall Flagg are said to be "pictures of a protagonist… and an antagonist" (549), and the man in *The Road* talks about the good and the bad guys to the boy. *The Stand* likewise strips metaphors as Bateman discusses how Communities A and B might deal with the reconstruction of society differently and how it would lead to war if "Society A is rich and Society B is poor" (345), which is much of what *The Stand* is about.

Still, whereas in the other novels characters are in certain discussions reduced to simple good/bad categories, Saramago simplifies the whole story into an allegory with a clear moral that is further underlined in the last pages. Laying out the central moral of the whole story so clearly on the last pages shows more about Saramago's approach and how his post-apocalypse can be seen as the modern equivalent of a fairy tale that uses a fantastic premise to teach something fundamental about humans, rather than a proper genre novel about the destruction of the world as we know it. For Saramago, the "extraordinary scale of the cataclysm" (91) allows him to exaggerate events in order to demonstrate his point on human behavior, thus further emphasizing how the apocalypse in itself is something that matters little

to him as a story element. While the narrator's focus has seemingly "no apparent relevance" (91), it is precisely through this central focus that allows him to get his point concerning our real life everyday blindness across.

Why the apocalypse happens is made explicit in both *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, and even if *The Road* avoids giving any concrete answers to what happened and why, the story is told in a way that leaves it open for interpretation. *Blindness* sidesteps this completely by showing clearly what is going on as the first man goes blind, but by making the reason so fantastic, there is almost no way to comment on the nature of the sickness. How people react to the sudden spreading blindness and how they react when they are struck by it, is commented on, as the doctor and his wife do in the last pages, but no real explanation is provided. It simply happens, people react to it, and then it—and in a way the apocalypse—ends. Even if *The Road* considers the end of the world itself uninteresting, the way *Blindness* forces the reader to ignore the question altogether makes it stand out even more, since the consequences of the apocalypse and its end are never considered. This is striking, and even in some senses naïve, in comparison to the realism put into the despair of the characters.

With all the evidence presented here, it becomes clear how *Blindness* deviates from almost all the main tropes of the genre; the apocalypse, how it is presented, what causes it, the connection to religion, and the lack of movement. Yet, even if Saramago is not interested in the specifics of the post-apocalypse, there are certain aspects of it that make it clearly a part of the genre. Such aspects are discussed next.

3.2 *Blindness* as a Post-Apocalyptic Novel

Despite the above discussion, *Blindness* belongs to the genre of post-apocalypse simply because its fictional world faces an apocalypse. As told by the narrator and later witnessed by the doctor's wife and her friends, the city and everything beyond it has turned to ruin. There is no electricity, people are running out of edible food and wander blindly around, many have died on the streets, and rabid dogs eat their corpses. The end of the world might happen gradually and without announcement, but it happens. The last part of the story depicts the characters travelling through the ruined city trying to survive.

In the end, when the blind regain their sight and the world is suggested to return to normality with the cries of joy from those now being able to see again, the novel reaffirms

its roots in the post-apocalypse: the end is rarely the end. After all the horrors of death and destruction, both *The Stand* and *Swan Song* end with good triumphing and the survivors beginning to rebuild the world, and so apparently does *Blindness*, too, even if the story ends abruptly [15].

Other similarities to the genre are motifs such as time losing its meaning: "All their watches had stopped, either they had forgotten to wind them or had decided it was pointless, only that of the doctor's wife was still working" (68). Like names, time has no meaning in this new world anymore as for the blind days and nights blend together in their constant whiteness, but even the doctor's wife, the only one that can see, begins to lose the track of days and weeks. Later, they realize that even the loudspeaker that has repeated its orders to the internees has broken down, the only remaining way of counting the days: "[T]he blast that came from the loudspeaker, recently it had spoken on certain days, on others not at all, but always at the same time, as had been promised, clearly there was a timer in the transmitter which at the precise moment started up the recorded tape, the reason why it should have broken down from time to time we are never likely to know" (188).

Finally, while there are not necessarily elements of the fight between the "good" and the "bad", even *Blindness* imagines some people exploiting others. All the authors of the four novels analyzed find it likely, that in the event of extreme distress, there will always be those who take advantage of others. As soon as the people in the other ward get their hands on a gun, they use it (and thus violence) to amass control over food and other precious resources. As with the other novels, these people can almost incontestably be called "bad," as they threaten others with violence and then rape them, like the cannibals in *The Road* and the warring factions in *The Stand* and *Swan Song*. In these instances, we find that the post-apocalyptic genre has little room for morally grey bad guys—those who commit bad deeds because they think they do so for the right reasons. Instead, most of the bad guys are often presented as entirely evil beings, who are willing to rape and murder both for their advantage and amusement, at times to the point where they are symbolically presented as the Christian devils. However, this conflict between two opposing factions in *Blindness* is limited to the

[15] The abrupt end right after the last companions of the doctor's wife regain their sight leaves it open to interpretation, since the novel does not reveal any of the even immediate effects of everyone being able to see again. As seen in *The Road* and the studies on it, this allows the reader to project their own views on what would happen next and as one who has just spent a significant amount of time with the hopelessness of *The Road*, it becomes easy to imagine that rapists and other hoodlums may re-emerge and drive the world deeper into despair. This remains only speculation, however. The sequel *Seeing* confirms that the world did indeed return to normal – at least before the mysterious case of the blank votes.

asylum as there is no fighting in the city. Still, the narration makes it clear that this could be simply because of the circumstances: people are so lost that they cannot find their own homes, which makes fighting rather impossible.

Though the similarities to the other works analyzed are extremely sparse, whether in plot or narrative focus, the fact that the blindness leads to the destruction of the country to the point that it is an apocalypse is significant enough to affirm it belonging to the genre. While the other novels share many tropes, none of these are as central as the apocalypse itself, for example, even if all the other analyzed novels feature travel as the main motivation of the characters, removing it would not change the genre and its focus. In contrast, removing the setting would have a significant impact on the narrative

3.4 Comparisons and Concluding Remarks

In view of the above discussion, it becomes apparent that *Blindness* is more of a thought experiment, a *what if* scenario, which uses the post-apocalypse mostly as a narrative frame to allow Saramago to present his moral. Even the original Portuguese title of the novel is "Ensaio sobre a cegueira," which translates to "Essay on Blindness." The post-apocalypse is the inciting incident in the other analyzed novels, whereas in *Blindness* the apocalypse happens gradually elsewhere in the story rather than in its center. In *Blindness*, Saramago fully commits to the reality of "what if all people went suddenly blind" and the post-apocalypse is more of an indirect result of it rather than the focus as in the other novels. *Swan Song, The Stand,* and *The Road* are all about how the end of the world could come to be, and what it would look like. In *Blindness*, the presented scenario simply leads to it: if we all became blind, society would eventually crumble as well. Even if *The Stand* might seem similar by its premise, in that if we all contracted a deadly infection, society would fall apart, there is a difference. The premise in King's novel is intended to lead to the post-apocalypse, that is, the story is about the post-apocalypse and what happens after it, whereas in *Blindness* it occurs as an indirect result of the events that have taken place. The focus is more on the "observations of a psychological nature" (91) than on the calamity. Moreover, soon after the fact that the characters are living in a post-apocalyptic world is revealed, the story ends.

The narrator in *Blindness*, who has a strong voice that is both quirky and humorous, makes himself visible through remarks such as:

> [A]ll spirits of discipline or sense of obedience had gone in the ward [of the hoodlums], the serious error on the part of the blind accountant was to have thought that it was enough to take possession of the gun in order to usurp power, but the result was exactly the opposite, each time he fires, the shot backfires, in other words, with each shot fired, he loses a little more authority, so let's see what happens when he runs out of ammunition. (*Blindness* 199)

It is through glimpses like this that we see the narrator's attempt to construct a realistic string of events, presented as if studying this together with readers, to fully explore the reality of a world suddenly gone blind. The attention to minute details is shown in how the narrator focuses on the sickening dirtiness of the ward, explicitly showing how the blind cannot find the bathrooms that stop working soon after their arrival: "The very air in the ward seemed to have become heavier, emitting strong lingering odours, with sudden wafts that were simply nauseating" (66). Like the slaves and infant corpses in *The Road*, they do not seem to be there simply for shock value but rather as a realistic examination of the situation. The doctor breaks down in tears as he attempts to find the bathroom, filth covering his clothes, the very worst humiliation that any man could suffer, and all this simply because he cannot find his way anymore. Later, in the city, they wonder about the consequences that will soon follow: "It is still early in the morning but the heat is already oppressive. The stench rises from the enormous refuse tip like a cloud of toxic gas, It won't be long before we have outbreaks of epidemics…" (293).

Such details are omitted in *The Stand*, where Larry lives in New York City for some days rather comfortably after most of the people have died of the flu in the middle of June. The city is described as "like being in a graveyard where the dead were not yet quiet" (309), but this is not evident when Larry is making cheese omelets only few pages earlier, even if his companion complains about the smells. After the window is closed, the world outside is shut out. The dead become real only when Larry attempts to leave New York through the pitch-black tunnel, a horror story of its own that ends as soon as he passes through it. After this, Larry can comfortably ride his bike again without the dead disturbing him. Similarly, Fran who lives in Maine, is the only one of two who survive the flu in the state. Yet, in her final chapter when she stays home, the presumably now rotting dead are not mentioned until she decides to bury her father. Once again, there is only one corpse among the thousands that is acknowledge and then turned into a horrific nightmare where she imagines her father waking up: "*It wasn't her father under there. And what was under there was not dead*" (255, italics original). The same is seen again and again when the characters travel across the states with the dead and the ruins

becoming problematic only when the story calls for it. In *Blindness*, every moment is affected by the spreading white disease.

The sequel to *Blindness*, *Seeing*, may at first seem to be a spiritual sequel to the former, but by the end of it, reveals a lot about Saramago's style and the way *Blindness* is constructed. The original Portuguese title of *Seeing* translates to "Essay on Lucidity" (*Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*), which also suggests that the novel is an imaginative thought experiment. In this novel, the mystery of the blank voters drives the city and the country quickly into chaos. The question of "what if all people went blind" has now changed to "what if people would cast empty ballots." However, the scale is now much larger, the whole city instead of a group of people, and the story shifts from an overall view of how the city reacts to it, to particular scenes between individual people. This is done to highlight details on how the situation is changing or affecting their lives. The story is, however, much more fantastic than in *Blindness*, even if the original premise would have it the other way around. Where in *Blindness* the disease is left unexplained, everything else is portrayed realistically. In *Seeing*, Saramago plays a light-hearted puppet master with the city and its inhabitants in several ways. For instance, on voting day, everyone leaves precisely at the same time at four o'clock, which baffles even the narrator (13). Similarly, when the city's government leaves in the dead of night, all the blank voters left in the city wake up and put their lights on inexplicably at the same time, thus lighting their path (72–73), and when the government begins to question people if they had cast blank votes, they answer:

> Us, don't be daft, and they would immediately adduce the legal reasons, with all their articles and clauses, and so fluently that it was as if all the city's inhabitants of voting age had been through an intensive course in electoral law, both domestic and foreign. (*Seeing* 43)

The city's inhabitants never explain why or how they do everything in such perfect unison and the narrator once again, as with the spreading blindness, draws attention to the oddity of it to make it invalid for readers to question if it really makes any sense. However, here even the tone of the novel is more playful than in *Blindness*.

Most revealing of Saramago's intention is perhaps "how" *Seeing* is a sequel to *Blindness*, the answer being that it barely is until the very end of the novel. After the examples above, the city is placed under martial law and the government considers attacking its own citizens. The following dialogue occurs between the president and the prime minister:

> What an extraordinary country we live in [the president said], a place where things happen that have never happened on any other part of the planet, But this is not the first time, as I'm sure I need not remind you, sir, That is precisely what I meant, prime minister, There is not the faintest possibility of a link between the two incidents, Of course not, one was a plague of white blindness and the other a plague of blank ballot papers, We still haven't found an explanation for the first plague, Or for this one either, We will, sir, we will […]. (*Seeing* 77)

This is the first reference that the novel makes to *Blindness*. There are no explicit nor implicit clues that it is the same country before this. The country is perfectly normal in every other way but with the current state of blank votes. This reaffirms that the post-apocalypse itself is not Saramago's main interest. Even if the ending of *Blindness* is left hopeful as people rejoice in regaining their sight, the reality is that they regain their sight in the midst of chaos where society does not function anymore; people have committed murder, stores have been robbed, the army has abused and imprisoned its citizens, and corpses fill the streets. It might have not suffered the grim fate of a novel like *The Road*, but it is easy to see that this would still affect the country in some irreparable way. None of this is shown in *Seeing*, as the country has already returned to normal, and the fact that it is indeed the same city as described before comes as a surprise to readers.[16]

After that one reference, the story continues again to focus strictly on the mystery of the blank ballots. Not until the halfway point of the novel are the events of *Blindness* finally fully addressed:

> I suppose we'll just have to continue grouping our way blindly forwards, said the president. The silence that fell was thick enough to blunt the blade of even the sharpest of knives. […] Just as we did four years ago [said the minister of culture]. The minister of defense rose, red-faced, to his feet, as if he had been the object of a brutal, unforgivable obscenity, and, pointing an accusing finger, he said, You have just shamefully broken a national pact of silence to which we all agreed […] Yes, prime minister, we are getting off the subject, all I said was that four years ago we were blind and what I am saying now is that we probably still are. (*Seeing* 157–58)

[16] It is also noteworthy, that *Seeing* clearly implies that the spreading blindness struck only their country. Once again, compared to the realism in the portrayal of the individual character in *Blindness*, this is both ridiculous and fantastic, as there is no way that the sickness would have limited itself only to the borders of one country or that even if it had, that all other countries would have ignored addressing the issue similarly as they have. *Seeing* does not delve too much into this, but *Death with Interruptions*, that can be considered as a spiritual sequel to the two novels, does, as only the people within the borders of their specific country do not die.

After arguing, the president and ministers decide that the time has come to address the blindness that thus far has not been discussed by a single soul in the whole country. The prime minister concludes his argument by saying:

> [W]e will say that the blindness of those days has returned in a new guise, we will draw people's attention to the parallel between the blankness of that blindness of four years ago and the blind casting of blank ballot papers now, the comparison is crude and fallacious, as I would be the first to recognise, and there will be those who will reject it at once as an offence to intelligence, to logic and common sense. (*Seeing* 162).

Later on, the president insists on releasing a manifesto which announces the connection between the two tragic events against the wishes of his prime minister. This conversation is once again commented on by the narrator:

> If this acerbic exchange had not taken place, if the presidential manifesto and the other leaflets had, because unnecessary, ended their brief life in the rubbish, the story we are telling would have developed quite differently from this point. We can't imagine exactly how or in what way […]. Unless, of course, the narrator were to be unusually frank and confess that he had never been quite sure how to bring a successful conclusion this extraordinary tale of a city which, en masse, decided to return blank ballot papers, in which case this violent exchange of words between the prime minister and the president of republic, which ended so happily, would have been as welcome to him as flowers in May. What other explanation is there for his abrupt abandonment of the complex narrative thread he had been developing […]. (*Seeing* 170–171)

From this point on, the narrative largely ignores the effects of the blank ballots and focuses on the doctor's wife and their group seen in the first novel. The president and his ministers learn that there was someone who did not go blind four years ago. They send in the police to track them down and to lay the blame on the doctor's wife and her group, accusing them of causing the blank ballots. They learn that the doctor's wife murdered someone (the rapist) with scissors, which gives them further reason to blame her—even if the police conducting the investigation learn that she is everything but a conspirator and this is a foolish venture. Nonetheless, the last hundred pages or so of the novel are seen from the viewpoint of the police officer appointed to dig up damaging information on the doctor's wife and her group. The ministry hails each bit of information as further proof of their guilt, even if the police officer and the readers are aware that the exact opposite is happening. The omniscient and changing viewpoint is now limited to the one character who is developed more than any other in the novel. In the end, when he tries to tell people that the doctor's wife is innocent, he is assassinated. Shortly after, the doctor's wife and her husband are likewise assassinated and the story ends.

The ending is just as abrupt as it is in *Blindness*, as noted in the review of *Seeing* by Terrence Rafferty: "[Saramago's] characteristic method is to take a fanciful, what-if? sort of premise, follow its possible ramifications for 300 pages or so and then, as if by fiat, declare the story finished" (*The New York Times*). Similarly, Saramago's novel *Death with Interruptions*, released a year after *Seeing* in 2005 (translated into English in 2008), continues the more fantastic and absurd storytelling found in *Seeing*. Set in an unnamed country, always referred as "this country," people find out that nobody dies anymore after the new year (of an unspecified year). The scope is more akin to *Seeing* than *Blindness* in how the scale is the whole country with brief glimpses on people with their own short stories, such as the old man and his family who figure out how to trick death by crossing the border. The beginning of *Death with Interruptions* explores what would "really" happen if people would not die anymore with the same realism that *Blindness* does with its explorations of blindness. The government is forced to answer questions such as where the terminally ill (but incapable of dying) would be put and what they will do with pensions, but it quickly becomes increasingly fantastic. Later, death herself, who insists on having her name in lowercase, sends a letter to the government and makes herself present to the whole country by announcing that she will send a letter beforehand to everyone who is about to die. As in *Seeing*, the last part of the book abandons the viewpoint focusing on the whole country, zeroing in on a few individuals, in this case death and a man who does not die even when he should have. The rest of the story ignores everything set before, not bothering to explain how "this country" manages after all they have been through, and develops both death and the man as they meet each other again and again in their intimate and personal story.

The plots of all three novels are what Rafferty says they are, what ifs that have a clear moral in the center, and by the end of the story when Saramago has exhausted the idea, the incredible premise is abandoned without any thought regarding its repercussions. When examined more closely, the narration in *Seeing* reveals even more about how uninterested Saramago is in the post-apocalypse itself, and how he is more intrigued by the human condition and morality. Essentially, this reduces the post-apocalypse to nothing but a story device rather than a story itself.

It is not only the premises that are fantastic in both stories, but also how Saramago plays with the citizens, ordering them to do what he wishes in order to get his moral across. *Seeing* insists that the whole country had agreed upon, without ever discussing it, that no one is to mention the blindness that struck them and that no one indeed has. This is the first time it

has been brought up by anyone. After regaining their sight, all the characters carry on with their lives, silently agreeing that none of it would ever be mentioned.

And there are no consequences of the apocalypse – because why would there be for Saramago's country? For Saramago, the post-apocalyptic is a narrative frame rather than the main goal of the narration, unlike in the other novels discussed. This specific yet unnamed and unknown country, and not the world as *Blindness* would suggest, is like a petri dish for Saramago, which is removed from everything else, and can be used as he wishes to conduct his experiments, only to be totally reset by the end of the story.

Blindness leads to post-apocalypse because, as Saramago so meticulously chronicles, society would crumble if everyone suddenly went blind, but herein lies the main difference: It is a story of what would happen *if people went blind*, not *what people would do if the world ended*, and even though the difference can be considered subtle, it is there. *The Stand*, *Swan Song*, and *The Road* all begin with the end of the world and are fundamentally *about* the end of the world, whereas *Blindness* is not. This makes it even more appropriate that in the last third of the novel, the readers can even find themselves surprised by the extent of the disease and its effects as the internees finally manage to escape, as this is never brought to the forefront of the narration. Although *Blindness* alone points to this conclusion, it is especially clear after observing how *Seeing* ignores any consequences that the events in *Blindness* would have had. The country has returned to perfect normality and the sickness is only brought up when it is convenient, and the two stories coincide, or when Saramago finds himself unable to decide how the story should end, if one is to believe the quirky comment made by the narrator.

The narrator found in all the mentioned novels by Saramago is as much a character as any of those taking part in the story, though the narrator might argue otherwise as he attempts to convince that us he is not in control of it:

> The trouble with these narrative digressions, taken up as we have been with bothersome detours, is that one can find, too late, of course, almost without noticing, that events have moved on, have gone on ahead, and instead of us announcing what is about to happen, which is, after all, the elementary duty of any teller of tales worth his salt, all we can do is confess contritely that it already has. (*Seeing*, 124–125)

To Saramago specifically, each word carries meaning to the point that his fantastic tales are at times even more about how they are told rather than what they tell.

Seen in this light, all the mentioned novels by Saramago, *Blindness, Seeing,* and *Death with Interruptions* are comparable to *A Modest Proposal* (1729) by Jonathan Swift. In each, a satirical narrator comes up with an incredible premise that he explores exhaustively to the point of grim reality or ridiculousness, whether that is how literal blindness would lead to people failing to find their way to the bathroom in *Blindness*; how a case of blank ballots—a figurative blindness in democracy—could lead to the government warring against its own people in *Seeing*; or how the insurance companies and gravediggers would react to the fact that people never die, in *Death with Interruptions.* As in *A Modest Proposal*, the premises can be considered as ridiculous as eating children, yet they all go to great lengths when exploring the idea and its consequences. Even if the narrator remains sarcastic and the events used as an example are more than extraordinary, the narrative is told specifically in that way in order to demonstrate a real-world problem that we are currently facing. In a way, *Blindness* can be considered as much a post-apocalyptic novel as *A Modest Proposal* can be considered a recipe for cooking children: it uses a great deal of the text to discuss it, but at its core, it is not truly about it. Indeed "Essay on Blindness" might have just as easily have been titled "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Spreading Blindness Faced by Our Country."

4. Conclusions

Both *The Road* and *Blindness* depict an end-of-the-world reality where every moment is affected by a *world* post-apocalypse, from its narration and description of the fictional world to the way the characters act as they try to survive from one moment to the next. *The Stand* and *Swan Song* attempt to do something similar. However, where the post-apocalypse in *The Stand* and *Swan Song* is at the core of the story that drives both characters and the plot, it is more of a unique narrative frame in *The Road* and *Blindness.* It functions as a tool used by the authors to demonstrate something fundamental about us as people that they would not be able to say in any other setting.

The lack of any definitive details, names, time, and place, reaffirms the purpose of the post-apocalypse in *The Road* and *Blindness*. In both novels, the narration goes to great lengths, sometimes seemingly intentionally, to omit details because they are not deemed meaningful. It is about people and their reactions in extremely dire situations and the portrayal is meant to be universal rather time or place specific. Both *The Road* and *Blindness* could just as well take place in the early 20th century or the late 21st, and the readers are allowed to imagine ruins of their own, because the main focus is on the characters, not on any specific setting. In comparison, though *Swan Song* avoids pinpointing an exact year of when it takes place, the world ends because of the war between the US and U.S.S.R. On the other hand, *The Stand* states clearly at the beginning of the novel that the events of Book I take place during June 16 – July 4, 1990. Both *Swan Song* and *The Stand* are tied more or less loosely to the time of the apocalypse, and they comment on and criticize threats that were common at the time. [17]

Just as the 'when' does not matter in *The Road* and *Blindness*, neither does the 'why' or 'how'. *The Road* is a more obvious example of this than *Blindness*, as when it is read can affect how readers envision the end of the world. Because so little is disclosed about how it happened, the events can just as well be said to have been caused by climate change, a spreading disease that drives people insane, a meteor strike, or a nuclear war. *The Road* does

[17] It is, however, noteworthy that when republishing *The Stand*, King changed the date of the apocalypse from 1980 to 1985, finally settling on 1990 in the unabridged version. This shows that even if the original novel had a specific date and setting, some of the details can be changed without altering too much of the narrative. Still, there are details that give away that the original novel was written in 1978, such as when the students protest against police with "sign, just like in the sixties" and sing the song "the Baez crotch used to sing" (233).

not draw as much attention to it as *Blindness* does, but they both strive to make the same point: why and how is not as important, but the people who are affected by it.

The greatest conflicts in *The Road* and *Blindness* are caused by destruction, starvation, infection, and lack of shelter. People are driven to horrific actions in all these novels because of the circumstances to the point that some can be considered as evil. One of the major difference is that in *Swan Song* and *The Stand*, there are characters who are solely driven to do evil things because they want to, not only in the cases of The Man with the Scarlet Eye and Randall Flagg, but also others, such as Macklin and The Trashcan Man, who are depicted as simply enjoying the suffering of others. There are instances where resources come into question in even these novels, but they never seem to be the main reason for characters acting the way they do. There is almost always another motivation that drives the characters, especially in the case of the main characters, who often seek religious figures without even knowing why.

In *The Road* and *Blindness,* people are likewise acting in despicable ways, such as taking others captive and eating them, or confiscating food and raping people, but in these works, this is more rooted in the circumstances, than in the other two novels. The world presented in *The Road* has no food left, and the man and the boy mostly find forgotten scraps and even then, they suffer from starvation most of the time. In *Blindness*, there is not enough food for all the wards in the first place, so the hoodlums' stealing can be symptomatic of self-preservation. This leads them to take advantage of the other wards as they believe they can do so without repercussions.

Even if *The Stand* and *Swan Song* include scenes where malnourishment and survival in the post-apocalypse are in focus, they are few and marginal. In comparison, it is difficult to find a page in *The Road* where finding food or shelter is not the primary conflict or where, in *Blindness,* the characters would not be in some way trying to react to their blindness, whether learning to move when blind, figuring out what is going on, or if there is going to be food. The conflicts and danger in *The Stand* and *Swan Song* arise mostly from the actions of the evil characters and from their urge to kill the weak and subject them to their rule, especially toward the end of the novels. *Swan Song* addresses the desperation of the post-apocalypse briefly as Macklin and Roland realize they are running low on gas and food, but even then, the main reason they are raiding the country is to find and capture Swan.

The Road has its own evil men, cannibals, who are associated "with the primitive," as argued by Arielle Zibrak (114), by the following quote:

> The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons […]. Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dog collars and yoked each to each. (*The Road* 92)

The imagery is as horrific as the black van that Roland uses for torture, but the focus of the novel as a whole is still different. In *Swan Song*, Roland is a significant viewpoint character and his atrocious deeds are in the center of it as the horror element of the story, whereas in *The Road* the man and the boy only come across these cannibals once. Like the description of feces and diseases in *Blindness*, description in McCarthy's novel seems to be a natural part of depicting the post-apocalypse rather than part of the plot as such. While at first glance details such as these might seem to be there for shock value, both novels go further. The description of feces in *Blindness* is to illustrate how helpless the characters are even with the most mundane of activities and the humiliation it brings them, and it reminds them that there are going to be sicknesses soon. In *The Road*, the phalanx can be explained when examined with the earlier scene, where truck that the cannibals use breaks down and the man wonders how it is "running on God knows what" (64). The cannibal that sees them says: "You aint got but two shells. Maybe just one" (67), which explains the spears. The novel goes to great lengths to show how everything from bullets to oil and food is running out and how only the few strong survive.[18] Even the most hideous of characters in these novels are mostly just trying to survive.

The fact that McCarthy and Saramago are mainly interested in the post-apocalypse itself and how it affects people is made even clearer by how they choose to use nameless characters in their stories. As noted above, especially Saramago tends to construct novels that are specifically about certain extraordinary circumstances in order to highlight his moral. In *Blindness*, he gets closer to the characters and fleshes them out throughout the story, whereas in *Seeing* and *Death with Interruptions*, he mostly looks at the events from an omniscient perspective, preferring to zoom in only to emphasize a point, such as the old man and his family in *Death with Interruptions* as they realize how to trick death, or to showcase how the calamity is dealt with by ministers and other decision makers. Such minor characters often show up only once, the only reoccurring characters being the prime ministers and his consort.

[18] Such descriptions, biblical and archaic, have consistently been a significant part of McCarthy's narrative voice in all of his works. The word choices create the feeling of something biblical and out of this (contemporary) world. Similarly, much of the narration in *Blood Meridian* attempts to make its researched, historical setting seem more than that: "Nothing moved in that purgatorial waste save carnivorous birds" (66).

In *Blindness*, Saramago uses a rather different way of unravelling the disease and its effects, as the focus is on a small group of internees who do not see the development in the city. Yet, even here the main protagonists are simply the doctor, his wife, the girl with the dark glasses, and the first blind man. Even if by the end of the story the readers have a more fleshed out view of the characters, this does not seem to be the focus of the story itself. The first blind man is still simply depicted and referred to as the first man who became blind. His life, occupation, or family is never revealed, because it does not matter for the story. The fact that the doctor is an ophthalmologist is only noted because the first man to be blinded visits the eye doctor, thereby contaminating him with the disease. The fact that he is a doctor contributes little to the story itself. It is only when the internees have to decide who to name their leader does his being a doctor—and thus a reliable authority—play a small part in the plot.[19] The main characters share one by one how they turned blind, which reveals that the main characters of the story are simply the first logical group of people who would have turned blind in these particular circumstances.

Similar reasoning can be found in *The Road*, where the main characters are simply the man and the boy, and by the end of the story, this both is and is not the story of the two of them. As in *Blindness*, the characters become distinct personalities, and much time and consideration has been given to analyzing the man and the boy, especially whether the man truly is "a good guy" and whether he acts accordingly. When the characters in *Blindness* and *The Road* are compared to the characters in *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, we can see the difference more clearly. It is not only that all the characters are named, especially in King's writing where even the most minor of characters are named, but that *The Stand* has several hundred pages leading up to the end of the world. *Swan Song*, too, has an introductory chapter of each character before the end of the world, though their importance becomes more evident only later. In *The Stand*, for example, there are five chapters devoted just to Larry, that mostly focus on him becoming a rock star and failing with his relationships, and four chapters of Frannie Goldsmith trying to figure out her pregnancy. All this is before the flu outbreak and the deaths become the main conflict for the characters. In addition, there are characters such Mother Abigail, Randall Flagg, and the Trashcan Man who have such a major role in driving the conflict forward, that the story could not unfold without them.

[19] It is noteworthy that Saramago's writing is full of humor and the novel frequently plays with language and seeing. It is not by chance that the characters, who cannot see themselves, are called for example "the girl with the dark glasses" or "the boy with the squint" or that the characters use phrases associated with seeing, such as when the soldier shouts "Look here, blind man" (60).

The post-apocalypse is not just a setting in *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, as it may be in some Young Adult novels. Instead it is a significant driving force of the story. The significance of the pre-apocalypse, an important starting point as argued by Skult (71–72), is seen both in the environment and in characters, both of which are fleshed out in the chapters leading to the apocalypse. In these opening chapters, it is evident that even if the story needs the apocalypse, it needs just as much, if not more, the main characters in order for everything to happen. This, too, is one of the significant differences to the post-apocalypses imagined by McCarthy and Saramago, where who you were before the end has little or no significance.

The main characters in *Blindness* and *The Road* focus on surviving while everything else is unimportant. Even if arguably none of the stories would be similar if the main characters would change, it is more so with *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, which largely focus on aspects such as how Larry Underwood specifically deals with his recently gained and lost rockstar fame. In contrast, *The Road* attempts to ask to what lengths a father, perhaps any father, would go to save his son, and in *Blindness* the narrative examines the different ways different people would react to suddenly becoming blind.

In all the novels analyzed, the end of the world is the inciting incident that propels the story forward. In *The Stand* and *Swan Song*, the post-apocalypse is later turned merely into a battlefield that drives the characters together and against each other, whereas in *The Road* and *Blindness*, the post-apocalypse and survival is not just the main but the only story there is to tell. While the novels by McCarthy and Saramago have many differences between them, they both attempt to portray a believably ruined and destroyed world where survival is key, in order to communicate something about human nature. In these stories, there is no need for other conflicts beyond surviving from one day to the next. Thus, both novels present a world which most likely will eventually lead to the true end of humanity, at least to the point until, in *Blindness*, everyone suddenly regains their sight. *The Stand* and *Swan Song* both feature a few scenes where the characters worry about the circumstances they find themselves in and how they will survive, but this is rarely the main driving force, whereas in *The Road* and *Blindness* the same conflict is repeated and shown in different ways throughout. Here the latter two novels demonstrate that though Skult argues that the pre-apocalypse is the most important time period of post-apocalyptic fiction in order to make sense of it and as it otherwise turns into “merely a tale about something fantastic and otherworldly” (72), it is specifically this ambiguity that allows McCarthy and Saramago to say something deeper about the human predicament. The

unnamed worlds in these stories are not the focus, but merely the stage upon which people play certain roles.

The stories in *The Road* and *Blindness* focus on a few individuals and their survival, all nameless and thus 'anyone'. Both suggest, that in the settings that they have laid out, larger societies would be impossible to maintain, at least by good guys. Yet, this also demonstrates how McCarthy and Saramago attempt to develop their characters further by challenging their beliefs. Many articles have been written on the man's actions versus his words on finding good guys, and the doctor's wife discusses with others whether it was the right thing to do to murder a man, or if they should have let the hoodlums rape the women: "The doctor's wife lowered her head and thought, He's right, if anyone here should die of hunger it will be my fault, but then, giving voice to the rage she could feel welling up insider her contradicting any acceptance of responsibility, But let these men be the first to die so that my guilt may pay for their guilt" (*Blindness* 185).

The ambiguity of what it means to be good is challenged, as both the man and the doctor's wife deny others food in order to give it to themselves and their group. These kinds of morally difficult questions do not come in to play in either *Swan Song* or *The Stand* to the same extent. It is, then, such questions that *The Road* and *Blindness* are built upon. They are sometimes laid out explicitly in the narration itself, sometimes pieced out only after numerous readings, as the many articles written on *The Road* prove.

Considered horror fiction, *The Stand* and *Swan Song* present horror filled epics where memorable characters are pitted against each other in a final battle of good versus evil, which has proved to be a successful formula, as both novels are among the most popular of their respective authors. Yet, even with all the horror, they still belong to the camp of positivists, who, according to Skult, "would argue for the inevitable return of civilization in the face of its destruction, Jack London being an early proponent, and this is a view that I would say the majority of writers in the genre hold" (35). It is instead the literary post-apocalypses of McCarthy and Saramago, neither of which have been categorized as horror, that predict the true downfall of humanity in their post-apocalypses as they attempt to show how people, perhaps even universally, would react in the face of a total apocalypse.

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